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Abstract

This thesis discusses the relation of fashion to identity in Georgia from a historical and sociological perspective. Georgian fashion has recently attracted the attention of different actors of the international fashion scene, seeking for authenticity and exoticism. By reflecting on their Soviet heritage, on the civil war of the nineties and on current social realities, Georgian designers are shaping the narrative identity of their home country and are using fashion as a way of promoting Georgia abroad. Their international success relies on the disruptive character of the so-called “post-Soviet” aesthetic, which turns low fashion into high fashion. This is, however, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it reverses the lasting logic of diffusion of trends, from the West to the East, from the elite to the masses. On the other hand, it perpetuates the prejudices of foreigners towards post-Soviet countries in aestheticizing lower Georgian social classes. This research proposes to take a historical approach to understand the root causes of this debate and the specifics of this new trend. I thus investigate how fashion reflects the changing social identities, from Soviet era until now. Fashion is here considered as both an individual and a collective form of expression. By combining these two scales, I highlight why the language of fashion mattered more in the Soviet bloc than in the West and why it is still the case today.

Keywords: Georgia, Fashion, Identity, Soviet Union, Subculture

Diese Arbeit analysiert die Beziehung zwischen Mode und Identität in Georgien aus einer historischen und soziologischen Perspektive. Georgische Mode hat jüngst die Aufmerksamkeit verschiedener Akteure der internationalen Modeszene auf sich gezogen, die nach Authentizität und Exotik suchen. Georgische Designer prägen das Selbstbild ihres Landes und nutzen Mode um das Image Georgiens im Ausland zu fördern indem sie ihr sowjetisches Erbe, den Bürgerkrieg der neunziger Jahre sowie aktuelle soziale Gegebenheiten reflektieren. Ihr internationaler Erfolg beruht auf dem disruptiven Charakter der sogenannten post-sowjetischen Ästhetik, die aus „low fashion“ (also preiswerter Mode) „high fashion“ (Haute-Couture) macht. Es handelt sich dabei jedoch um ein zweischneidiges Schwert. Auf der einen Seite reversiert es die bestehende Logik der Trendverbreitung vom Westen in den Osten, von den Eliten zu den Massen. Auf der anderen Seite verfestigt es die Vorurteile von Ausländern gegenüber post-sowjetischen Ländern, indem es die unteren sozialen Klassen Georgiens ästhetisiert. Diese Arbeit wendet eine historische Perspektive an, um die grundlegenden Wurzeln dieser Debatte sowie die spezifischen Aspekte dieses neuen Trends zu verstehen. Es wird somit analysiert wie Mode sich wandelnde soziale Identitäten reflektiert, von der sowjetischen Ära bis heute. Mode wird hier als eine sowohl individuelle als auch kollektive Ausdrucksform betrachtet. Durch die Kombination dieser beiden Blickwinkel wird hervorgehoben wieso die Sprache der Mode im Ostblock von höherer Bedeutung war als im Westen und wieso dem heute noch so ist.

Stichworte: Georgien, Mode, Identität, Sowjetunion, Subkultur.

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Introduction

In 1983, a group of young Georgians, commonly referred to as the “Blue Jeans Generation”¹, were executed by the Soviet regime after failing to hijack a plane departing from Tbilisi in an attempt to escape from the Soviet Union. The survivors were subsequently tried and executed by the Soviet Georgian Court. They all came from the intellectual elite of the country and were famous for wearing jeans as a sign of protest and a pro-west political statement. Even today, this case remains very controversial in Georgia, where some see them as heroes of a generation starving for freedom, while others consider them terrorists. *Flight from the USSR* by Dato Turashvili, originally published in 1988, narrates their stories and is still a best seller in Georgia. The book was later translated and adapted as a stage play known as “Jeans Generation”.

This tragic event mirrored the social tensions between classes, generations, and above all between the growing dissident movement in Georgia and the Soviet regime. Blue jeans were a symbol of this dissident culture; during the Soviet period, wearing them was not a random choice. Instead, it reflected a set of beliefs and representations directed against the hegemonic culture imposed by the Soviet regime.

Using this event as a starting point, this research aims to investigate the relationship of fashion to a changing social context, from Soviet time to today. In line with recent literature on cultural studies in the “post-Soviet” area², I argue that one dynamic of the identity-building process lies in the everyday cultural practices and representations of individuals. I propose to use fashion as lens through which to examine this turbulent time in Georgian history. This case study is relevant for two main reasons:

First, fashion is an expression of tastes, classes and norms, all of which have undergone deep transformations over the past few decades in Georgia. The relevance of this topic also comes from the recent success of Georgian brands abroad, praised by

¹ See fig 3.1, 3.2, 3.3

² Isaacs Rico and Abel Polese, *Nation building and identity in the post-Soviet space: new tools and approaches*. (London: Routledge, 2016) Abel Polese, *Identity and nation building in everyday post-socialist life* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018)

foreign fashion magazines. The most impressive breakthrough of Georgian designers in the global fashion industry is certainly the nomination of Demna Gvasalia as Creative Director of the French owned luxury fashion house Balenciaga in 2015³, after working for Louis Vuitton and Maison Martin Margiela, another two French owned famous fashion houses. On the 5th December 2016, he won the award for International Ready-to-Wear Designer at the British Fashion Council Awards, thus beating long established designers like Donatella Versace for Versace⁴. In March 2017, he won the Council of Fashion Designers of America Fashion Awards, often referred to as “the Oscars of fashion”⁵. By reaching the top-class international fashion houses and reinventing their creative lines in integrating his own “post-Soviet” inspired style of fabrics and cut, Demna Gvasalia drew the fashion industry’s attention to his home country, Georgia, and paved the way for new Georgian designers to access new fashion markets. Surprisingly, there exists no academic research questioning the reasons behind the unprecedented and unique development of fashion in this Eastern European country and why Georgian fashion recently became a trend abroad. This research thus aims to use anthropology in an historical approach to understand the relations of individuals and social groups to the cultural norms expressed by fashion throughout time. Finally, in contrast to other forms of popular culture, fashion is a visual statement shown to the external world; it overcomes possible translation issues, like other pictorial art forms, and makes it an appropriate object to be analysed when writing about a foreign culture.

Second, Georgia is a textbook case in terms of identity formation and cultural transformations⁶. Historically speaking, Georgia has always been a melting pot of influences, due to its geographical location on the Silk Road⁷, an ancient network of trade routes connecting Western and Eastern cultures. Even today, it is complicated for Georgians to assess where they stand, culturally speaking. In a 2015 poll surveying

³ Sarah Mower, “How Demna Gvasalia Is Revolutionizing Balenciaga From the Inside Out” *Vogue*, August 2016 <https://www.vogue.com/article/demna-gvasalia-balenciaga-artistic-director-vetements-cofounder-designer>

⁴ “Balenciaga’s Georgian creative director Demna Gvasalia wins international fashion award” *Georgian Journal*, December 2016 <https://www.georgianjournal.ge/arts-a-culture/33133-balenciagas-georgian-creative-director-demna-gvasalia-wins-international-fashion-award.html>

⁵ “Georgian designer Demna Gvasalia honoured at CFDA Fashion Awards” *The Calvert Journal*, March 2017 <https://www.calvertjournal.com/news/show/7997/georgian-designer-demna-gvasalia-honoured-at-cfda-fashion-awards>

⁶ Pierre Razoux, *L’Histoire de la Georgie : la clé du Caucase* (Paris : Perrin, 2009)

⁷ Jingkui Jiang, “Silk Road Cultures and the Silk Road Economic Belt,” *Chinas Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road* (2018) pp. 15–22

Georgians of different ages and social classes, the majority of the participants answered, “I don’t know” when asked which modern culture is the closest to Georgian culture, and which traditions are the closest to the Georgian traditions.⁸ Georgia has been also a creative centre, even during the Soviet Union, with its vibrant artistic scene⁹, sunny climate, tasty cuisine and beautiful landscapes, which made it one of the primary tourist destinations during Soviet Time. Georgia, and Abkhazia in particular, were known as the Soviet Riviera¹⁰¹¹ with approximately three million tourists every year. The number of tourists per year is now increasing; it grew from four to six million between 2012 and 2016, according to the Georgian Ministry of Tourism¹². Tourists come mainly from neighbouring countries, but trends are showing an increased interest of Western European travellers as well.

In this context, my research proposes to analyse the development of fashion in the modern history of Georgia, from the eighties till today. Fashion magazines, as primary sources focusing mainly on the creative process, do not aim to have an in-depth anthropological analysis on how and why this new fashion scene has established itself in the Georgian society of today. The historical approach of my argumentation will help to bring this innovative perspective to fashion. It aims to underline possible trends or ruptures in Georgian fashion and to see if and how it echoes social changes from Soviet to post-Soviet time, notably when discussing the evolution of the links between politics, social norms and dissident youth culture.

It will be structured in three historical parts, divided by key events that mark a rupture in the political and social landscape of modern Georgia, ultimately influencing the fashion industry and the way people dressed, as far as fashion is an expression of both individual and social realities.¹³ Some historical events are more developed than others, because they had a special impact on the narrative identity of Georgia, notably

⁸ Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2015) "Caucasus Barometer". Retrieved from <http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/> on June 2016

⁹ Zaza Bourassa, “Tbilisi is Fucking: Documenting Tbilisi’s New Sexual Confidence With Omara Gogichaishvili” *PostPravda*, December 2017

¹⁰ Shechmeister, Matthew “War-Torn and Overgrown, Ghost Town in Soviet Paradise” *Wired* July 2010. <https://www.wired.com/2010/07/gallery-russian-resort/>

¹¹ Bassa’s Blog, “Tourism in Georgia in Soviet Times” *Georgia About*, October 2013 <https://georgiaabout.com/tag/tourist-information/page/10/>

¹² Georgian Ministry of Tourism, *Georgian Tourism in Figures: Structure and Industry Data* (2016)

¹³ Georg Simmel, “Fashion” *International Quarterley*, Vol. 10 (1904)

the failed terrorist attack of the Blue Jeans Generation, the revolution for independence and the civil war of the Nineties.

The first chapter of this thesis set the theoretical framework of this thesis. Using fashion theory, it aims to investigate what fashion is and means, and how it informs us about the society we are examining. A clear definition of fashion will also help me to bridge fashion theory to post-post transition theories, to then stress the specifics of Georgia when discussing fashion and society. A key variable of this chapter is the relation of individuality to society.

The second chapter will mainly focus on the Soviet politics of fashion¹⁴, aimed at creating an uniform society, and on dissident cultures, at the time of the failed terrorist attack of the Jeans Generation. The third chapter will start in the early nineties, at the time of the independence referendum, and will cover the civil war of the nineties, famously called the “Dark Nineties” in Georgia¹⁵. At that time, the social, political and economic system of Georgia was collapsing, with criminality, violence and corruption rising to exceptional levels. Based on my observations and interviews, I will try to draw parallels between this chaotic time and how Georgian citizens are making sense of it today, to question the place of fashion in a country that was opening up to foreign influences and to the market economy¹⁶.

The last chapter follows the development and democratization of Georgian fashion, freed from the Soviet system, in a context of economic growth and political stability. 2016 is considered as the breakthrough of Georgian fashion abroad, with the rise of a new trend, labelled as “post-Soviet” by international fashion magazines¹⁷¹⁸¹⁹. This disruptive type of fashion, inspired by street fashion and underground cultures,

¹⁴ Jukka Gronow and S.V Zhuravlev, *Fashion meets socialism: fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society - SKS, 2015)

¹⁵ Kornely Kakachia a. all, *25 Years of Independent Georgia: Achievements and Unfinished Projects* (Tbilisi: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung & Ilia State University Press, 2016)

¹⁶ D. Lane, “Identity Formation and Political Elites in the Post-Socialist States”. *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 6, (2011) pp. 925-934. I.B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: “the East” in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

¹⁷ Alec Leach, “Why 2016 was the Year of Post-Soviet Fashion” *Highsnobiety*, 28 December 2016

¹⁸ Liza Foreman, “Post-Soviet fashion makes a glamorous return” *BBC Designed*, October 2017
<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170922-post-soviet-fashion-makes-a-glamorous-return>

¹⁹ Anastasiia Fedorova, “Why post-Soviet is more than just an aesthetic” *Dazed and Confused*, June 2016
<http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/31347/1/why-post-soviet-is-more-than-just-an-aesthetic-egor-rogalev>

is reflecting on Georgia's recent history to propose an ironic, but somehow stereotypical, visual identity of Georgia to foreigners. This is therefore a controversial label in Georgia, as this independent country aims to display its national identity beyond a reference to its Soviet past.

Overall, each chapter brings elements of answer to the following question: From Soviet era to now, how does the evolution of fashion reflect the changing social identities in Georgia? The answer to this question determines to what extent this interrelation between society and fashion participates in the national narrative identity of Georgia and frames its perception abroad. It thus addresses the current debate around the label "post-Soviet" and the reasons behind the controversy. As one Georgian designer once told me: "Fashion is fashion; there is no such thing as post-Soviet fashion. It's time to move forward!"

Literature Review

Generally speaking, post-Soviet transitions in the Black Sea area have been seen through the lens of political studies of democratization²⁰, economics²¹ and security²². Social research, cultural and anthropological studies²³ do exist alongside these frameworks but are still marginal. This is notably due to the mainstream theoretical framework on transition that is used by western scholars to discuss the ongoing and future changes in “post-Soviet” countries, as later described in the theoretical framework. Moreover, most of the existing studies have adopted a regional approach to the Black Sea Region in order to compare the path of newly independent countries of the former Soviet bloc. To some extent, comparison is a valuable way to analyse

²⁰Claudio M. Radaelli *The Politics of Europeanization* (Oxford 2003). Jacques Rupnik, *Géopolitique de la démocratisation : l'Europe et ses voisinages* (Presses de SciencesPo 2014). Jacques Rupnik, "The Postcommunist Divide," *Journal of Democracy* Vol.10, No. 1 (1999). Marc Morje Howard, "Postcommunist Civil Society in Comparative Perspective" *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: The Origins and Evolution of Hybrid Regimes in the Post-Cold War Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). Eburon Uitgeverij, H. Kitschelt, "Formation of party cleavages in post-communist democracies: Theoretical propositions." *Party politics*, Vol.1, No.4 (1995) pp. 447-472. Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996). Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies" *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (1991). Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Indiana University Press, 1994). F.L Altmann, J. Deimel & A.G Schmidt "Democracy and Good Governance in the Black Sea Region" *Commission on the Black Sea, Policy Report IV* (2010)

²¹ Mark De Broeck and Vincent Koen, "The Great Contractions in Russia, the Baltics and the Other Countries of the Former Soviet Union: A View from the Supply Side," International Monetary Fund, *Working Paper WP/00/32* (2000). B Aral, "The Black Sea Economic Cooperation after Ten Years: What Went Wrong?", *Alternative*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (2002)

²² Alexander Rondeli. *The choice of independent Georgia in: The security of the Caspian Sea Region*. (Oxford University Press, 2001). A.S. Makarychev, "Securitization and Identity. The Black Sea Region as a "Conflict Formation"", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 43 (2008). Marian Zulean, "Reforming the Security Sectors in South Eastern Europe: Lessons Learned and their Relevance for a Wider Black Sea Area Policy," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* Vol. 3, No. 4 (2004). Sergii Glebov, "Black Sea Security as a Regional Concern for the Black Sea States and the Global Powers" *Southeast European and Black Sea* Vol. 9, No. 3 (2009). Mustafa Aydın, "Geographical Blessing Versus Geopolitical Curse: Great Power Security Agendas for the Black Sea Region and a Turkish Alternative" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* Vol. 9, No. 3 (2009). Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, "The "Security Paradoxes" of the Black Sea Region." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* Vol. 9, No. 3, (2009).

²³Mary Bucholtz, "Youth and Cultural Practice" *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 31 (2002). Caughey, John L. *Imaginary social worlds: a cultural approach* (Lincoln,: University of Nebraska Press, 1984). Jean-Yves Durand, ""Traditional Culture" and "Fold Knowledge": Whither the Dialogue Between Western and Post-Soviet Anthropology?" *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 36 (1995). Alex S Edelstaing, *Total propaganda: from mass culture to popular culture* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997). Tim Edensor, *National identity, popular culture and everyday life* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002). Michael Ellman, *The social costs and consequences of the transformation process* (Geneva: UN, 2000).

changes in a targeted geographical area. In the case of the former Soviet bloc, it uncovers the similarities between each country, which have all been dominated by the Soviet power in their recent political history.²⁴ It thus supports political, economic or security arguments, but not so much anthropological ones, as this field deals with the specifics of people and culture. Besides this common Soviet past, the national cultures of the countries of the Black Sea Region have little in common.²⁵

By choosing a country-case study for my research, I aim to fill this gap in literature on Georgia, in terms of topic and approach. It will also contribute to the expansion of the existing anthropological literature, in that nothing has been specifically written on the fashion industry in Georgia. Indeed, cultural studies as such are a relatively modern field of research²⁶ initially developed in Great Britain in the sixties and seventies. It bridges different critical approaches, including semiotics, political science, sociology, communication, media studies and history with the objective of highlighting the various dynamics behind contemporary culture. Within this field, the production of cultural goods and their consumption is a well-discussed topic, linked to a set of representations that can be analysed in a more constructivist approach.

Popular culture is therefore at the core of this field of study. This broad concept becomes more and more important to analyse in the context of globalization, fostered by the rise of cultural exchanges, mass media and new technologies. If it is often understood as an inferior type of culture, some scholars²⁷ have instead defined it as a hegemonic space at the basis of identity formation, at the individual, local, national and regional level. As patterns of popular culture are observable in the everyday life of individuals²⁸, I will use the term “everyday culture” to avoid the negative connotation attached to the concept of popular culture. My work will analyse one specific object of this everyday culture: fashion.

²⁴ Rudolf L. Tökés “Transitology” : Global Dreams and Post-Communist Realities» *Central Europe Review* Vol. 2 No. 10 (2000)

²⁵ Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn, “Post-Post-Transition Theories: Walking on Multiple Paths.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2008)

²⁶ Simon During, *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007)

²⁷ Tim Edensor, *National identity, popular culture and everyday life* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002). John Storey, *Inventing popular culture: from folklore to globalization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012)

²⁸ Abel Polese, *Identity and nation building in everyday post-socialist life* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018)

Fashion is a relatively marginal topic in the social sciences and modern cultural studies. As already stated, popular culture in general but fashion in particular has often been seen as frivolous because it deals with appearances and, to a certain extent, with beauty. However, these aspects are inherent to culture and should not be underestimated when studying cultural norms and trends. Fred Davis, in his book *Fashion, Culture and Identity* published in 1992, has notably demonstrated that changes in fashion trends come from social identity trends. Because this book was published in 1992, he has logically not dealt with “post-Soviet” countries. My research proposes to prolong his analysis in applying it to Georgia.

However, Soviet fashion has been rather well documented by historians. The book *Fashion Meets Socialism: Fashion Industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War*, published in 2013 and written by Jukka Gronow, a Swedish sociologist, and Sergey Zhuravlev, a Russian historian, as well as the research of Larissa Zakharova on identity, culture and fashion in the Soviet Union, will be of great help to better understand and contextualize the second chapter of my thesis, from the eighties to Georgian independence. It will also help me to draw parallels between the current state of fashion in Georgia and its Soviet path.

In short, my research situates itself between history and international relations as it relies on constructivist theories applied to identity and culture. Constructivism is one of the most recent academic field within international relations theories, used notably to demonstrate how certain norms and realities are socially and cognitively constructed²⁹. It is thus an appropriate and original approach to analyse fashion as a cultural and social object, especially in a context where past and present international influences are shaping fashion trends in Georgia.

²⁹ Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams. *Social identifications: A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes* (London: Routledge, 1988)

Methodology

Because of the language barrier, accessing the Georgian National Archives was problematic. To overcome this challenge, the corpus of primary sources will rely mainly on two distinct types of materials. First, international specialized magazines in fashion and Soviet Fashion magazines. Second, I have a set of two types of interviews: semi-structured and unstructured.

The semi-structured interviews are based on a set of questions used in a flexible way and adapted to the interviewee. Indeed, when collecting the interviews, my aim was to have different perspectives on the fashion scene in Georgia. I thus interviewed designers, brand managers, public relations managers and journalists. Some questions, about the “post-Soviet” label, the state of fashion today and its development in the future were asked to all of them, in the same exact words. Others were precisely about their sphere of expertise. The semi-structured format allows the interviewee to elaborate on the points that seem more relevant to his or her work³⁰. As my research deals with fashion as a cultural and creative practice, this approach seems appropriate to explore the dynamics lying behind the creative process of making and promoting clothes, which would not be revealed in a rigid structured interview.

Although the flexibility of the questionnaire allowed the interviewee to discuss the social context in which his or her work is embedded, this is not the axis of the semi-structured interview. Instead, I will focus on the making of cultural goods in order to highlight the influences and representations in the final product produced by fashion designers. Another reason why social issues are not at the core of these interviews is to avoid putting the interviewee in a difficult situation where he or she is asked to comment on topics, which could be controversial and/or go beyond his or her interests or expertise. Nevertheless, the format of the interview gives him or her the opportunity to express his or her subjective views on the matter, if wished.

The objective of this approach is to highlight how the viewpoints of the local actors of the Georgian fashion scene and the opinions of foreign journalists echo one another or differ in their interpretation of fashion in Georgia. How do foreign fashion

³⁰Z. Šesták, “Holliday, A.: Doing and Writing Qualitative Research. 2 nd Ed.” *Photosynthetica*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2008)

journalists perceive the current trends in Georgia? Do Georgian designers create with the aim to reach and please an international audience? How do they integrate international trends, or foster new ones? These questions are answered through a careful analysis of fashion magazines, complementing the secondary sources on fashion and culture. This method is inspired from the one used by Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System*.

The unstructured interviews³¹ were mainly collected through a research method called participant observation, which align with modern research methods in cultural anthropology that favour field research.³²³³³⁴ It requires being continuously involved in the environment of the targeted community to collect and combine direct observation, collective discussions, life-stories interviews, and to participate in the life and rituals of the group at stake. It is coherent with my theoretical framework and my aim to explore the subjectivity and worldview of individuals towards everyday cultural practices³⁵. It is also in line with the rationale of this research, to avoid a western-centric approach. This format helped me to have an insight into Georgian society from the Georgian point of view.

This method was particularly useful to grasp the specifics of current subcultures in Georgia, which appear to be a great source of inspiration for some Georgian designers, after years of rejection of their identity by the Soviet power. Young people who identified with this culture were more willing to discuss their experiences and views in a casual context and in a familiar environment. Most of the conversation took place in the preferred social venues of this category of youth, such as bars, cafés and clubs, considered as free zones for sexual minorities and marginal young people in Tbilisi.

This culture is relevant when discussing fashion trends on the one hand, and on the other hand, the social structure in modern Georgia. Indeed, unstructured interviews helped me to understand how social belongings are framed and perceived

³¹ Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, *Handbook for Interview Research: Context and Method* (Sage Publications, 2002)

³² Judith Stacey and Joseph T. Howell, "Hard Living on Clay Street: Portraits of Blue Collar Families." *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1996) pp. 459

³⁴ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922)

³⁵ Daniel Bertaux and Martin Kohli, "The Life Story Approach: A Continental View" *Annual Review of Sociology* (1984)

by individuals themselves. Also, it fills the gap of available English sources on social transformations in Georgia, especially when talking about subcultures. In terms of structure, interpretative elements and transcriptions of the interviews will be spread throughout the different chapters of the argumentation.

CHAPTER ONE:

Fashion and identity: some theoretical considerations

This chapter details the theoretical framework on which this thesis relies. The first part focuses on the cognitive and social factors at play behind the concept of fashion, and the second part deals with the issue of changing identities, as formulated by post-post transition theories.

I. Fashion theory

This part investigates what fashion is and means, and how it informs us about the society we are looking at. This is a much-discussed topic in fashion theory, and it is possible to identify evolutions in the definitions given by scholars from different disciplines and centuries. Definitions are sometimes infused with the social and political views of the thinker. For instance, Karl Marx's thoughts on the fashion industry are intrinsically linked to his critique of capitalism³⁶. He rightly pointed out that the cycle of fashion is representative of a capitalist society based on consumption. This remark is useful to understand the Soviet politics of fashion and the planned economic system on which Soviet fashion relies. This will be detailed in the second chapter. However, fashion goes beyond the clothes industry, which is concerned mainly with the production and consumption of clothes. Fashion as a language to understand individuals and society is at the core of my research purpose.

Accordingly, cultural studies and the theory of constructivism better fit my purpose to highlight the relationship of fashion with identity. Because the marketing

³⁶ Karl Marx, Ernest Mandel, and David Fernbach, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books in Association with New Left Review, 1992)

and business sides of fashion are relevant when discussing questions of mainstreaming and commodification of specific social and cultural identities, it will be mentioned and partially analysed but only through this chosen theoretical framework. Therefore, this thesis is not a market research nor a business analysis.

1. *Fashion as language*

Even if the definition of fashion varies, comprehensive reviews of scholars and intellectuals from the nineteenth and twentieth-century, as found in fashion theory readers³⁷, show that regardless of the historical context or the school of thought of the thinkers, fashion is commonly seen as a “material and symbolic system . . . made of things and signs, as well as individual and collective agents, which all coalesce through practices of production, consumption, distribution and representation”³⁸. Clothes are the raw materials of this system of signs and symbols, which was best theorized by Roland Barthes in his book *The Fashion System*. First published in 1967, this book applied semiology to fashion.

Semiology is commonly known as the science of cultural signs, aimed at analysing the cognitive mechanisms behind their interpretation³⁹. In simple words, in semiology, clothes would be the sign, the person wearing it would be the signifier and the person looking at it would be the signified, the one who received the message transmitted by clothes. Semiology enables the analysis to go beyond the simple description of appearances and styles. In Barthes’ book, the sign is said to have a rhetorical connotation, going beyond its technical purpose. It means that if clothes were words, fashion would be the language elaborated on this raw material. As such, it can be translated and interpreted, depending on the context in which both the signifier and the signified are embedded. In other terms, it means that the sign has different meanings when read in a different spatial or temporal frame.

It leads to two assumptions: at the micro level, fashion is a mean of communication from the individual to the world. At the macro level, fashion is

³⁷ Marco Pecorari, "The Practice of Theorizing Fashion." *Cultural Politics*, Vol.13, No. 1 (2017)

³⁸ Agnes Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, *Thinking through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists* (2016)

³⁹ Boguslaw Zylko "Culture and Semiotics: Notes on Lotmans Conception of Culture." *New Literary History*, Vol. 32, No. 2, (2001)

reflective of specific social realities⁴⁰, as far as its comprehension is dependent on the context in which it appears and develops. In short, fashion is both an individual and a collective form of expression⁴¹ that I will analyse in the Soviet and “post-Soviet” social contexts of Georgia. This theory allows me to explain the cycles of fashion, designers’ inspirations, and the mechanisms of identity-building.

2. Fashion as reflection of individual and societal identities

The first scholar to address the question of fashion as both an expression of individual and societal identities was George Simmel, a German sociologist and philosopher, in an article soberly named “Fashion”, published in 1904⁴². In this article, he explains the cognitive logics at play in identity-building processes, shaped by the antagonist forces of individuality and society. Using psychological and philosophical arguments, he argues that both the need for self-expression and the need for socialization are constitutive of human nature. Based on this affirmation, he introduced sociological arguments on the influence of the social hierarchy and power relations between the upper and lower classes. In doing so, Simmel shows how fashion, and the evolution of fashion, is a product of these psychological and social rules.

According to him, trends first appear because of their disruptive character from mainstream cultural norms. They are launched by the economic elite of the society, which cares more about distinguishing itself from the majority and which has also more means and resources to express themselves without facing the same social pressure of lower social classes. From the cognitive perspective, following a trend comes first, with the illusion of self-expression and distinctiveness from the masses, and second, with the need for socialization within a same social group. It means that each member of the upper class will first, adopt a specific trend to distinguish himself from the masses and second, express his social and cultural belongings and bonds with his pairs. Lower social classes, answering to the same need for self-expression, are said to have a greater incentive to copy and imitate the tastes and attitudes of the economic

⁴⁰ Valerie Steele, review of *Fashion, Culture and Identity* by Fred Davis (1992)

⁴¹ Georg Simmel, “Fashion” *International Quarterley*, Vol. 10 (1904)

⁴² Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion Theory: an Introduction* (Routledge, 2014)

elite, thus “crossing the line of demarcation”⁴³ in an attempt to socialize themselves with another group, perceived as superior. In following this logic, the initially disruptive trend becomes mainstream, thus making it unattractive for the upper classes, and so, unfashionable again.

This theory partially assumes that the antagonist forces of individuality and social classes are linked to the relations of power existing in hierarchical societies. Simmel comes then to the conclusion that fashion can exist only in a modern and capitalist society, shaped by social classes’ struggles and possible social elevation.

At first sight, this theory would be applicable to modern Georgia only, as far as the existence of upper and lower social classes was supposedly inaccurate during socialist times. The recent and booming fashion scene in the country even seems to confirm Simmel’s point on the intrinsic relations between fashion and modernity. Plus, it explains the current cultural conflict arising in modern Georgia around the controversial concept of “post-Sovietism”, which refers to low fashion turned high, and implies a relative aesthetisation of lower social classes. These points are particularly representative of the micro and macro level of fashion as a mean of individual expression and identity projection.

However, one cannot understand the importance and the dynamics of fashion in modern Georgia without looking first at its Soviet past. Indeed, class distinctions did exist at the time, as did the quest for differentiation. Plus, because of the oppressive social and cultural Soviet system, the need for self-expression through fashion turned out to be of political, not merely social, importance under Soviet rule. Therefore, it appears necessary to reintegrate cultural and psychological specifics of Soviet Georgia in the analysis of individual and collective “post-Soviet” identities in order to adapt the findings of this theory to a geographical area not covered by George Simmel.

⁴³ Georg Simmel, “Fashion” *International Quarterley*, Vol. 10 (1904) pp134

II. Identity in transition: questioning myths and stereotypes

1. *Cultural studies and the dynamic nature of culture*

In comparison to Western countries, conflicts between high and low cultures mattered less in the Soviet Union than conflict between authorized and unauthorized cultures⁴⁴. Because of the authoritarian nature of the regime, authorized culture derived from the state ideology, based on the principles of collectivism and national cohesion. Focusing on this aspect of culture thus gives indications on the national identity of Soviet Georgia, as designed by the Soviet power. On the other hand, it says very little about individual identities, as far as self-expression was seen as a deviance under Soviet rule. This historical specificity is still deeply rooted in modern Georgian society and therefore has an impact on the making of fashion, its meaning and its consumption.

Second, Georgia, like other countries of the former Soviet Union, still has an unresolved relationship to its Soviet past⁴⁵, which is either romanticized and promoted as a cultural characteristic, or strongly rejected. It is thus necessary to consider national identity as an evolving cultural matrix⁴⁶ that establishes connections between past and present and between different cultural groups.

Therefore, it is much more accurate and challenging to highlight the different narratives on identity and culture⁴⁷ in Georgia, at the individual and collective level, to see if they are competing or mutually reinforcing each other and why. One element of this cultural matrix is popular culture and everyday life⁴⁸, such as fashion. The analysis is based on the relation of measurable and objective cultural practices with cultural worldviews, echoing the semiotic theory of fashion proposed by Roland Barthes.

⁴⁴ Irinia Six, "'Born in the USSR': Searching High and Low for Post-Soviet Identity." *Urbani Review* 11 (2008) pp 232-251

⁴⁵ Isaacs, Rico, and Abel Polese. *Nation building and identity in the post-Soviet space: new tools and approaches*. (London: Routledge, 2016)

⁴⁶ Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. (Berg, 2002)

⁴⁷ David Matsumoto, "Culture and Cultural Worldviews: Do Verbal Descriptions about Culture Reflect Anything Other Than Verbal Descriptions of Culture?" *Culture & Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2006)

⁴⁸ Laura Grindstaff, "Culture and Popular Culture: A Case for Sociology." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2008)

2. *Identity in transition and unpredictability*

If culture and national identity are dynamic concepts⁴⁹, they are even trickier to study in the Georgian context, which has undergone deep social and cultural transformations in the last thirty years, from Soviet to “post-Soviet” time. To guide me in my research, I will rely on the post-post transition theories as formulated by Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn in 2008⁵⁰ in his anthropological literature review of transition theories on post-socialism. If the name sounds wordy, it is to better reflect the complexity of transitions, which is a point missing in classical transition theories. The author argues that the term itself is ironic, yet also more accurate for the situation of “post-Soviet” countries in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

His critique is that transition theories are western biased and have therefore failed to integrate the cultural and moral complexity of “post-Soviet” societies. Transition theories are derived from social evolutionism, which sees progress as a frame to analyse societies and history while legitimizing the structure of power fostering progress. As such, Marxism is an evolutionist theory⁵¹ but so is neoliberalism. Both adopt a holistic vision of society while erasing cultural and moral specifics. Therefore, if the failure of Marxism has led to the complete destruction of the existing structures, forcing neoliberalism on newly independent countries would have had the same negative effect in the long run. In fact, the introduction of privatization has led to the growth of mafia and oligarchy, because of the inadequacy of this model to a culture that relies on networks, communities and memory.⁵² This micro level of analysis has been underestimated in political theories on the economy, which confirms the relevance of anthropology to understand “post-Soviet” societies.

Indeed, following the independence of “post-Soviet” countries, neoliberal transition theorists have formulated the hypothesis that these countries will progressively adopt the neoliberal model to break with their Soviet past. They have therefore assumed a certain predictability regarding the development of “post-Soviet”

⁴⁹ Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. (Berg, 2002)

⁵⁰ Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn, “Post-Post-Transition Theories: Walking on Multiple Paths.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2008)

⁵¹ Marion Blute, “Review of Gerhard Lenski's Ecological-Evolutionary Theory: Principles and Applications: Social Forces” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* (2005)

⁵² K. Wolczuk, “Uncertain Transition. Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World,” *Political Geography* Vol. 19, No. 6 (2000)

countries, perceived through Western centric lens⁵³. Post-post transition theories aim to reintegrate identity, cultural and moral factors in this spectrum of transition to highlight why and how the actual development of “post-Soviet” societies was and remains uncertain, and moreover, and differs greatly between each society of the former Soviet bloc⁵⁴.

In doing so, the focal point is individuals and how they “accommodate, resist, interpret and shape”⁵⁵ their everyday cultural practices to a changing context. This framework suits my purpose of highlighting the meaning of fashion, as an everyday cultural practice in a changing society, and will allow me to illustrate the heterogeneity of the narratives on culture and identity in modern Georgia. Finally, the critical theory of post-post-transition is designed to avoid western-centric observations of cultural practices in Georgia in the context of social transformations.

⁵³ D. Feuer, "The post-Soviet states: mapping the politics of transition," *Political Geography* Vol. 22, No. 2 (2003)

⁵⁴ Michael Burawoy, and Katherine Verdery. *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999)

⁵⁵ Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn, "Post-Post-Transition Theories: Walking on Multiple Paths." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2008) pp.237

CHAPTER TWO:

Soviet Fashion

This chapter intends to highlight the specifics of Soviet fashion and its politics. Indeed, because the Soviet system aimed to organize the lives of its citizens in an authoritarian way and to dictate cultural norms, fashion should be considered within the political, ideological and economic context in which it is embedded.

Therefore, in the first subpart of this chapter, I will rely mainly on two books, which propose a rich empirical analysis of fashion as a system during Soviet time: Larissa Zakharova's *S'habiller à la soviétique : La mode et le dégel en URSS* published in 2011 and *Fashion Meets Socialism: Fashion Industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War*, published in 2013 and written by Jukka Gronow, a Swedish sociologist, and Sergey Zhuravlev, a Russian historian. Both books base their analysis on a wide range of key Soviet primary sources, such as official resolutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the government, on specialized magazines and on other documents published by designers and economists. Most of these documents are archived by the Moscow Design Museum.

Because of the language barriers, these books are great tools for non-Russian speakers interested in Soviet fashion. They bridge historical context to fashion theories, thus producing a comprehensive analysis of the Soviet politics of fashion. They go beyond the description of the institutional system in analysing how the Soviet rhetoric is translated into fashion, with the aim to create an appealing "Soviet style". This approach is particularly interesting when discussing norms and how they are socially, and here politically, constructed. The constructivist approach of this thesis is partly inspired by their work.

However, little or nothing is said about specific geographical areas within the Soviet space. It confirms the relevance of my research purpose focusing on the case of

Georgia, which ultimately expand in time and space the scope of these two books. Also, because of the systemic approach of these two books, none addresses the question of the personification of fashion by models and celebrities. This point is key to understand the identification process between people and styles, at the individual level, and how it is translated into a normative trend at the social level. I thus applied their findings on the rhetoric of Soviet fashion, infused with the state's ideology, to the ideal figure of the "working girl", a major fashion trend in the eighties that can be found in both Western and Soviet fashion magazines.

Finally, although the subcultures' fashion is partly analysed by these two books, its political aspect is relatively side-lined. In short, their main conclusion is that alternative fashion is an expression of individuality, which is de-facto a political act in the Soviet normative ideology. I align with this statement, but the Georgian case of the Jeans Generation demonstrates that fashion can also express strong political positions.

According to these observations, this chapter is divided in two parts. The first one deals with Soviet fashion and its politics, uniformly applied to the whole Soviet space. Next, the chapter turns to an analysis of Soviet fashion magazines, which I had the chance to study in Georgia, with the help of Salomé Mikashavidze, Public Relations Manager at *Matériel*, the successor of the main Soviet-era fashion house in Georgia. In both parts, I will address the question of youth subcultures in the Soviet Union to illustrate the tension between individuality, western influences and socio-political oppression.

I. Soviet Fashion: language of the propaganda

1. *Fashion: the anomaly of the Soviet Union*

The first analysis of Soviet fashion by Soviet scholars appeared when discussing the internal politics of Nikita Khrushchev, who ruled the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964 as First Secretary of the Communist Party.⁵⁶ This period was characterized by

⁵⁶ Jukka Gronow and S.V. Zhuravlev, "Introduction" *Fashion meets socialism: fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society - SKS, 2015)

strong economic growth, driven by technology, and by a relative thawing period with the West along with the de-Stalinisation process in the Soviet Union.⁵⁷ It came with a special interest of the Communist Party and the government in regulating and promoting Soviet culture.

The restructuration of the planned economy included the fashion industry, which was strongly supported and financed by the state as part of the politics of material culture in the Soviet Union. The assumed purpose of these politics was to compete with the culture of the capitalist bloc, notably in improving the quality and diversity of consumer goods.⁵⁸

Soviet Houses of Fashion, first established in Moscow in 1944, multiplied in the capitals of the Soviet Republics and functioned as design research centres.⁵⁹ They depended on the Ministry of Light or Consumer Goods Industry and existed alongside specialized houses, for leather or shoes for instance. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Ministry of Everyday Services opened centres of services aimed at reducing the burden of housework. It proposed a wide range of services, from hairdressing to sewing ateliers⁶⁰. These offered tailor-made and exclusive clothes for the small economic elite and were the equivalent of Western luxury brands, with some local designers making a name for themselves. It was of course forbidden to open a private business, but their permanent position, offered to all Soviet workers including designers, allowed them to build their reputation within the institutions where they usually worked for a lifetime⁶¹.

Altogether, the fashion system established by the Soviet power appeared stable and well-organized, in line with the Soviet belief that a rationally planned economic model, under state control, will lead to gradual but long-term wealth, in comparison with the constant fluctuations of the market economy. In practice, the Soviet fashion system depended on production and distribution plans, based on the consumption

⁵⁷ Hervé Coutau-Bégarie. « Hélène Carrère d'Encausse. 1956. La déstalinisation commence. » *Politique étrangère*, No. 4 (1984)

⁵⁸ Jukka Gronow and S.V Zhuravlev, "Introduction" *Fashion meets socialism: fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society - SKS, 2015)

⁵⁹ Moscow Design Museum – Exhibition: "Design System in the Soviet Union" 2017-2018 <http://moscowdesignmuseum.ru/exhibitions/archive/6262/>

⁶⁰ Jukka Gronow and S.V Zhuravlev, "Introduction" *Fashion meets socialism: fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society - SKS, 2015)

⁶¹ Id.

norms established by Soviet economists. For this system to be efficient, consumption had to be absolutely predictable: everything that is produced should be consumed and used until it deteriorates.

But because of the unpredictable nature of fashion, clothes became a symbol of the flaws of the planned economic system. According to George Simmel's theory on fashion⁶², fashion is driven by novelty: when a fashion good becomes too popular and emulated, it stops being attractive. Thus, it works against the logic of the planned economy. Trends are short-term and usually change before clothes become unusable.

Also, as the production and the distribution processes were in the hands of the government, the clothes factories did not have, as a rule, to adapt their technologies to the will of designers, further limiting their creative potential. The recurrent complaint of consumers about the poor quality of their clothes was thus addressed to the industry rather than to the designers themselves. Prices were also set by the Ministry with the aim of keeping them low and stable, which made the introduction of new and more complicated clothes less profitable⁶³. The gap between the clothes advertised in fashion magazines, or in the fashion shows organized in the Soviet Union and abroad, and their actual quality thus increased, feeding the frustration of both consumers and designers.⁶⁴

The answer to this rising dissatisfaction was ideological. The Soviet system had to convince consumers that a working economic model could only be sustainable if they limited their consumption to necessities. The economic issue of rationality was thus also a social and cultural problem for the Soviet power. Accordingly, the regime defined standards of consumption based on goods' function rather than on their attractiveness.

⁶² Georg Simmel, "Fashion" *International Quarterley*, Vol. 10 (1904)

⁶³ Jukka Gronow and S.V Zhuravlev, "Chapter Two: the formative years of the Soviet fashion industry" *Fashion meets socialism: fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society - SKS, 2015)

⁶⁴ Jukka Gronow and S.V Zhuravlev, "Introduction" *Fashion meets socialism: fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society - SKS, 2015)

2. *The rhetoric of rationality*

What makes Soviet fashion particularly interesting is the clear combination of a discursive strategy, in line with the Soviet ideology, to respond to the shortcomings of the economic system and to the frustration of Soviet consumers.

At the core of this fashion propaganda against the West is the critique of “bourgeois fashion,” which was presented as impractical, baroque and frivolous. In a nutshell, Soviet fashion claimed to be the true fashion, attractive, current and stylish without being frivolous and unpredictable. This rhetoric is intrinsically linked to the Soviet ideology and economic structure.

To meet the goals of the planned economy, clothing choices should depend on rational categories, such as seasons, climate and activities. Accordingly, the Soviet power created a list of clothing items needed per citizen, hoping it would be an answer to the constant penury of fashion goods. Each citizen should thus have three coats: one for winter, one for the mid-season, and one extra one⁶⁵. It translated into practice the main fashion theory in the Soviet Union, formulated by Nadejda Lamanova⁶⁶, who first designed clothes for the Russian Imperial Court. She defended the concept of “prozisklousstvo”, industrial art made accessible for all. She also created the concept of “functional costume”, designed based on the following questions: what is the purpose of the clothing and for whom is it designed? The existing variety of clothes was based on the variety of functions and situations, including holiday, work, night, and day. Accordingly, rationality trumps the aesthetic. Parallely, to reduce the frequency of shifting trends, designers were asked to produce more neutral clothes and silhouettes. This slowed down the rhythm of fashion, thus altering its nature. It further limited the diversity of clothes and colours, with a preference for soft and neutral tones such as grey or black.

This accompanied a discursive strategy, which favoured “style” over “fashion”⁶⁷, a question which was the core of the art magazine *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*,

⁶⁵ Larissa Zakharova « Chapitre 1 : La mode « dite » : débats entre professionnels et dilettantes - La mode dans les conditions de l'économie planifiée » *S'habiller à la soviétique : La mode et le dégel en URSS* (Paris : CNRS Editions 2011)

⁶⁶ Id.

⁶⁷ Id.

translated as “Decorative Art in the USSR.” The first publication dates from 1963⁶⁸. “Style” was the proposed alternative to constant changes of fashion, considered as absurd.⁶⁹ This is a recurrent debate in fashion, first expressed by Coco Chanel, who said that “Fashion passes, style remains.”⁷⁰ Semantically, style and fashion have different social functions.⁷¹ A style is representative of a society and its specific culture, defined in relation to its past and to the surrounding world. Fashion, on the other hand, reflects the relations between the individuals of a same society, as determined by the logic of imitation and diffusion theorized by George Simmel. Therefore, placing the emphasis on style helps to suppress the potential expression of differences and individuality. Officially, the role of Soviet designers when studying Western trends was to adapt them to Soviet social and ideological factors, thus constructing a Soviet style: realistic, sober, and stable.

In short, this strategic rhetoric legitimated the social function⁷² of Soviet designers within Soviet society and contributed to the state propaganda against the West by, first, underlining the specifics of Soviet society, and second, suppressing the expression of differences and individuality. Even if, as the second part of the chapter will show, trends in the West and in the East were similar, the narratives attached to them differed. In the Soviet Union, the explanation behind the emergence of a trend is closely linked to Soviet cultural and social ideals, as defined by the political ideology.

As an example, in the sixties, tight pants and mini-skirts became a trend in both blocs. While in the West, these items were an expression of the sexual liberation of women, in the East, they were said to be the expression of the importance of sport in Soviet society, with the mini-skirt showing the athletic silhouettes of women and tight pants making sporting activities easier.⁷³

⁶⁸ Larissa Zakharova « Introduction » *S’habiller à la soviétique : La mode et le dégel en URSS* (Paris : CNRS Editions 2011)

⁶⁹ Id.

⁷⁰ Julia Neel “Best Coco Chanel Quotes” *Vogue UK* 18 August 2017
<http://www.vogue.co.uk/gallery/coco-chanel-quotes-and-photos>

⁷¹ Larissa Zakharova « Chapitre 1 : La mode « dite » : débats entre professionnels et dilettantes – La mode et le goût du point de vue de la logique sociale » *S’habiller à la soviétique : La mode et le dégel en URSS* (Paris : CNRS Editions 2011)

⁷² Larissa Zakharova « Introduction » *S’habiller à la soviétique : La mode et le dégel en URSS* (Paris : CNRS Editions 2011)

⁷³ Id.

Roland Barthes wrote that “*through the language which henceforth takes charge of it [fashion], Fashion becomes narrative*”. This sentence refers to the role of the fashion magazine in spreading norms and tastes through a strategic use of the words chosen to describe the clothes. His book does not analyse the political use of fashion, certainly because it covers only Western fashion where politics had little to do with the fashion industry, unlike in the Soviet Union. The penetration of the Soviet ideology in the fashion industry made fashion a means of propaganda, aimed at justifying the existence of fashion in the USSR.

3. *Uniformity versus individualism? The case of the Stilyagi, the first subculture of the Soviet Union*

In short, taking inspiration from some of the Western trends was a common practice among Soviet designers, but the re-interpretation they proposed had to respect the norms established by the Soviet economic model and ideology. The combination of both fostered and established uniformity as a social rule. Accordingly, individualism was perceived as a threat to public order. This was especially the case when individualism accompanied an idolization of Western culture, against which the Soviet model was competing.

A symbol of this cultural rivalry is *Stilyagism*, which can be translated in modern terms as “hipsterism:” “a person who follows the latest trends and fashions, especially those regarded as being outside the cultural mainstream”⁷⁴. In the 50s, *Stilyagi* were the first youth subcultures to demand their right to express themselves through clothes. It meant copying the most eccentric Western trends to distinguish themselves from the sober Soviet style. *Stilyagi* dressed in an extremely colourful way, with haircuts and make-up inspired by American jazz and rock and roll cultures and aesthetics. As such, they became the antithesis of style, as defined by the Soviet ideology. They were mocked for their eccentricity and became representative of the deviations of Western fashion and bad taste.⁷⁵

Therefore, *Stilyagi* were not only considered as criminals, because of their connection to the black market, but also as traitors to Soviet public morality and as

⁷⁴ Hipster (noun) in the English Oxford Living Dictionaries online
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hipster>

⁷⁵ see fig.1.1 and 1.2

potential Western spies, brainwashed by Western culture. This mainstream negative opinion was constructed and spread by highly effective Soviet propaganda through media, labour unions, youth communist organizations, called *Komsomol*, and university networks. As a result, the holistic Soviet society became culturally oppressive. Public bashing of *Stilyagi* was frequent, showing that social pressure turned out to be the most efficient way for the regime to control alternative culture and norms.⁷⁶

As an illustration, in the sixties, the Soviet regime asked the following question to 17,446 youth aged from fifteen to thirty years old: “What do you think about your generation?”. The first identified threat was alcoholism, but one sixth of the interviewees mentioned *Stilyagism*.⁷⁷

This reality is well depicted in *Stilyagi*⁷⁸, a 2008 Russian movie financially sponsored by the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. The success of the movie⁷⁹ and its story-telling, especially the closing scene, translate how current popular culture reflects on this past trend. It is a romantic comedy centred on the evolution of Mels, a young Soviet student who lives in a communal building with his father and brother, from a diligent member of the *Komsomol* to a leading character in the *Stilyagi* society. Throughout the film, the characters are constantly insulted in the street, chased, and beaten up by their parents. This was however not the case of higher-class *Stilyagi*, protected by their social status. They led the *Stilyagi* movement, because they had better access to Western items thanks to their relations, money and travels. Several scenes pictured them as sexually liberated, especially girls, but mostly apolitical.

The film reveals two important elements of this subculture: first, it was easier for boys to adopt this style, as *Stilyagi* girls were systemically associated with prostitutes⁸⁰. Second, *Stilyagism* was more a creative movement than a political one. The claim for self-expression was directed against society, rather than against the

⁷⁶ Olga Vainshtein, "Orange Jackets and Pea Green Pants: The Fashion of Stilyagi in Soviet Postwar Culture." *Fashion Theory* Vol. 22, No. 2 (2018)

⁷⁷ Larissa Zakharova Chapter 4 : « Les canaux informels des transferts de la mode occidentale en URSS » *S'habiller à la soviétique : La mode et le dégel en URSS* (Paris : CNRS Editions 2011) pp208

⁷⁸ Yuriy Korotkov, Valeriy Todorovskiy *Stilyagi* Directed by Valery Todorovsky (Moscow: 2008)

⁷⁹ *Stilyagi* grossed over 490 million rubles in Russia

⁸⁰ Larissa Zakharova Chapter 4 : « Les canaux informels des transferts de la mode occidentale en URSS » *S'habiller à la soviétique : La mode et le dégel en URSS* (Paris : CNRS Editions 2011) pp 208

Soviet ideology. It was an expression of tastes, which were not systemically linked to a political opinion.⁸¹ Nevertheless, in a society infused with Soviet cultural norms of sobriety and uniformity, expressing individuality was perceived as a moral sin associated with arrogance and pride, which were considered incompatible with the egalitarian principles of the Soviet ideology.

Stilyagism actually followed the same logic of appropriation and adaptation to the Soviet social reality as official Soviet fashion. But the *Stilyagi* version of Western trends of the fifties was far more colourful and eccentric than the Western model.⁸² During the World Festival of Youth and Students organized in 1957, students from all over the world gathered in the Soviet Union's capital, exposing Soviet youth to Western tastes through music and fashion.⁸³ The latter failed to meet their expectations. The Western style was more sober, messier, and more "street-wear."

If *Stilyagi* clothes were more colourful than Western versions, it is because they aimed to distinguish themselves from the neutral grey Soviet uniform. It shows that the *Stilyagi* movement was about building an identity in a specific cultural context, rather than simply copying the West. It ultimately followed the same logic of the official Soviet fashion system, which is selecting and readapting Western trends to the Soviet social reality. The difference between the more sober Western fashions and the *Stilyagi* version does not weaken *Stilyagi* culture; in fact, it reinforces its distinctiveness. As noted in the first chapter, at a macro level, fashion trends can only be understood in the social context in which they appeared.

In short, at a micro level, self-expression of tastes through fashion was in the Soviet Union a de-facto protest against the established rules, even if no political statement was initially intended. Alexei Kozlov, former *Stilyagi* and saxophonist, explains in *S'habiller à la soviétique : La mode et le dégel* that he then realized that appearance and fashion mattered more in the Soviet Union, because of penury, social pressure and ideology, than in the West. As the message of clothes was politically tainted by the Soviet ideology, choosing clothes was more meaningful than in the West.

⁸¹ Id.

⁸² Id.

⁸³ Calum Gordon "Exploring the USSR's underground obsession with Levi's 501s" *Dazed and Confused*, 19 August 2016
<http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/32495/1/exploring-the-ussr-s-underground-obsession-with-levi-s-501s>

Finally, *Stilyagism* opened the way to other forms of youth subcultures, which all protest against cultural oppression and social pressure.⁸⁴ In the last scene of the movie, we see Mels walking down the street of contemporary Moscow. Punks, gothics, rappers, and hipsters, all representing alternative styles and cultures, progressively joined him⁸⁵. They marched through the city singing “go on, play on” and “this style defeats fear”. The degree of politicization of each subculture varied, but ultimately increased in the years preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union. Last but not least, during Soviet time, none of these styles was commodified by a capitalist system of fashion, leaving their cultural identity and demands intact. Their absence from Soviet fashion magazines actually illustrates this last point.

II. Case Study: Soviet fashion magazines

Soviet fashion magazines are great sources to empirically investigate these themes of appropriation, identity building and the influence of the state’s official rhetoric. I had the chance to access to some of them, collected and carefully kept by *Matériel*, the oldest fabric and fashion retailer in Georgia. Currently supporting young Georgian designers, *Matériel* continues to be a key player in the development of the Georgian fashion industry.

Matériel’s history is enlightening when discussing Soviet fashion in Georgia: the house was first established in 1949, at the time named Fashion House Materia; it created and produced fashion lines and collections for both the domestic and regional Soviet market and participated in international fashion shows⁸⁶. On its website, *Matériel* underlines that its fashion collections benefited from the experiences of its designers in both the Soviet and European scenes, confirming the connection of Soviet designers with Western fashion, as previously underlined.

I reviewed around 20 magazines, some edited outside Georgia in other Soviet countries, notably in Russia, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, from the fifties to the late eighties. Most date from the late eighties, which I believe is due to conservation

⁸⁴ Olga Vainshtein. "Orange Jackets and Pea Green Pants: The Fashion of Stilyagi in Soviet Postwar Culture." *Fashion Theory* Vol.22, No. 2 (2018)

⁸⁵ See fig 1.3

⁸⁶ From *Matériel’s* official website, see :

http://materieltbilisi.com/index.php?route=information/information&information_id=4

issues. The few copies from the fifties and sixties were indeed in relatively poor states, which confirmed my assumption that older primary sources are hard to access, especially when not conserved in museums or archives. Nevertheless, the available sources reinforce my findings on fifties and sixties fashion in the Soviet Union and are sufficient to provide a precise view of the fashion trends in the late eighties, before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Fashion in the eighties was dominated by theatrical silhouettes, reinforced by massive shoulder pads, flashy colours and an abundance of glittery ornaments and pearls.⁸⁷ This fashion turn became famously known as “power dressing”.⁸⁸ As demonstrated, fashion trends mirror a specific social context, which was at the time in the West, the golden era of capitalism and its excesses, with an increasing number of working women. The figure of the business woman became an ideal well-depicted by the fashion industry, with shoulder pads as visual statements of power, reinforced by big belts.⁸⁹

At first sight, Soviet fashion, as pictured in the magazines, followed the same exact trends. Oversized shoulders, saturated colours and perm hair can be found in each magazine from the early to the late eighties, regardless of the country in which the magazine was edited. But if eighties fashion represented the West’s obsession with excess and power, how could it be the same in the anti-capitalist bloc? One needs to reintegrate the Soviet rhetoric of fashion to answer this question.

1. *What does the comparison between Western and Soviet fashion magazines tell about the rhetoric of fashion in both blocs?*

First, the difference between Soviet and Western photoshoots highlight the importance of sobriety in the Soviet fashion ideology⁹⁰. In Western magazines, photoshoots started to be really creative, often featuring complex settings centred on

⁸⁷ Laird Borrelli-Persson, “The History of ‘80s Fashion in Vogue” *Vogue*, June 2017

⁸⁸ Jack Sunnucks, “Is power-dressing a thing of the past?” *Dazed and Confused*, March 2016
<http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/30253/1/is-power-dressing-a-thing-of-the-past>

⁸⁹ Kim Hyoju and Bae Soojeong, “A Study on the Transition of Power Dressing in Contemporary Fashion” *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings* (2016)

⁹⁰ Olga Annanurova, “(Im)possible to Try: Notes on Soviet Fashion Photography” *Fashion Theory*, Vol.22, No. 2 (2018)

the model. *Vogue*⁹¹, for instance, the most famous and longest established fashion magazine, collaborated only with well-known fashion photographers, who elevated fashion photos to the level of art and redefined the history of fashion through iconic imagery.⁹² The print quality of the magazine itself, with its glossy pages, enhanced the singular style of the pictures.

Moreover, in the late eighties, western fashion magazines started merging pop culture and fashion, thus putting a greater emphasis on the individuality and life-style of the select few, which led to a sharp increase in sales. This major turn in the fashion industry came after Anna Wintour became editor-in-chief of US *Vogue* in 1988; she chose the world-famous pop singer Madonna for the US edition of the magazine in May 1989⁹³, against the advice of the editing board. In that month, the sales of the magazine increased by forty percent⁹⁴. The line between celebrities and models became blurry, with models aiming for fame in their own right.

The early nineties were therefore known for its “Supermodels”, with Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Linda Evangelista, Claudia Schiffer, Christy Turlington and later, Kate Moss. The difference between models and supermodels is not only the number of magazines covers and runaways they participated in; their fame comes also from their ability to represent the taste and ideals of a generation, thus inspiring designers in their creation and ultimately selling more clothes or magazines. According to the late eighties’ taste for luxury and extravagance, these models had very glamorous and sensual looks and a corresponding wealthy and showy lifestyle that was extensively covered by paparazzi. This trend began to falter in the second half of the nineties, characterized by a minimalist and grunge aesthetic, which did not fit the full-bodied “glamazon” supermodels⁹⁵⁹⁶.

⁹¹ See fig. 2.1

⁹² Elena Martinique, “Famous Vogue Photographers and Brilliant Artists” *Widewalls*, August 2016
<https://www.widewalls.ch/famous-vogue-photographers-and-brilliant-artists/>

⁹³ See fig. 2. 2

⁹⁴ Ellie Krupnick, “Models vs. Actresses On Covers: What The Shift Has Meant For Celebrities’ Bodies” *HuffingtonPost*, May 2013
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/31/models-vs-actresses-covers_n_3368280.html?guccounter=1

⁹⁵ “A complete guide to the history of the Supermodel” *Highsnobiety*, July 2015
<https://www.highsnobiety.com/2015/07/23/supermodel-history/>

⁹⁶ Bob Colacello, “A League of Their Own” *Vanity Fair*, September 2008
<https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2008/09/supermodels200809>

In short, in the eighties Western fashion magazines, sometimes known as “glossies” because of their shiny pages, with their fancy supermodels, famous photographers, expensive photoshoots and abundant luxury advertisements, became a sophisticated product as much as the clothes they were promoting. This was not the case for Soviet fashion magazines.

In the Soviet Union, the print quality was lower, like the quality of the clothes, constrained by the planned economic model. No glossy covers could be found in the Soviet magazines I reviewed, which all contained fewer pages than the Western ones. Photoshoots were also more sober⁹⁷, putting the emphasis on the clothes more than on the model wearing them, as the vast majority of the models were anonymous. There were several photoshoots taken outside, in what seemed to be random locations⁹⁸. The posing and settings pictured everyday life, with no surprising or unusual elements added and no storytelling. It created a distinctively sober style in comparison to the eccentric and provocative style of Steven Meisel, for instance, who was a major fashion photographer in the eighties and responsible for the success of the Supermodels⁹⁹.

The models themselves looked like everyday people too¹⁰⁰. Women certainly corresponded to the beauty standards of the time, but the photographer did not showcase them as special human beings. They also appeared far less sexualized than in Western eighties fashion magazines¹⁰¹. There was no equivalent to supermodels in the Soviet bloc, and none or few “personalities” appeared in the magazines. In line with the politics of Soviet fashion, equality trumped singularity. Therefore, readers and potential consumers could relate to the models pictured in the magazine more easily.

Indeed, Soviet magazines actually showed a greater diversity of models. The majority of the sampled magazines pictured women and men in various sizes and age groups¹⁰². The magazines presented kids’ fashion¹⁰³ alongside senior fashion, while Western magazines focused mainly on women in their twenties, all of them

⁹⁷ See fig. 2.3

⁹⁸ See fig 2.4

⁹⁹ Pierre Alexandre de Looz, “Who is Steven Meisel” 032c, December 2008
<https://032c.com/who-is-steven-meisel/>

¹⁰⁰ Olga Annanurova, “(Im)Possible to Try: Notes on Soviet Fashion Photography.” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 22, No. 2018

¹⁰¹ See fig 2.5

¹⁰² See fig 2.7

¹⁰³ See fig 2.8

corresponding to the body standards imposed at the time. Children, men and older people had their own specialized press in the West. Following the imperative of homogeneity, it made sense for Soviet fashion magazines to represent different groups of society, all placed on an equal footing.

In short, the main difference between Western and Soviet fashion as presented in magazines is not so much to be found in the clothes themselves, even if the quality differed, but in the rhetoric of fashion, as narrated by magazines. On the Western side, fashion sublimated everyday life in presenting models with rare body features in extravagant settings. On the Eastern side, fashion instead represented everyday life by presenting normal people of different ages in ordinary settings. As for the concept of the working girl, central in eighties fashion in the West, I make two arguments regarding the presence of similar trends in the East.

First of all, in the West, fashion magazines, with the help of creative photoshoots and supermodels, heavily stressed the symbolism surrounding the “working girl” concept. They thus participated in the elaboration of an ideal, which, by definition¹⁰⁴ is, “a standard or principle to be aimed at” or, when used as an adjective, “existing only in the imagination, [it is] desirable or perfect but not likely to become a reality” according to the Oxford English Dictionaries. In reading these magazines, readers are inclined to buy similar clothes to get closer to this ideal. The concept of the working girl is thus more an unreachable abstraction than a reality. A woman can actually work without having to conform herself to the stereotype presented in the magazine, and at the same time, wearing a typical working girl costume does not mean one is actually at work. Fashion, to some extent, is a disguise, reproducing a constructed ideal.

Second, as the concept of the “working girl” is foreign to the Soviet Union, in that women have always worked under Soviet rules, the symbolism attached to this trend made little sense. In readapting Western trends to Soviet social reality, designers removed their capitalist meaning. Following these trends had more to do with the impetus to comply with what was seen at the time as fashionable. For the elite, it was the opportunity to express their wealth through clothes that were still not made

¹⁰⁴ Ideal (noun) English Oxford Dictionaries online <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ideal>

affordable for the mass market. It expressed their belonging to a distinct social class, which had more connection to the outside world than with ordinary citizens.

This is the irony of Soviet fashion; if magazines were representative of the society as a whole, in a sober manner in comparison to Western photoshoots, they still targeted a narrow economic elite.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, instead of relating to a constructed ideal, consumers expressed their wealth only to distinguish themselves from the masses. To use Barthes' terminology¹⁰⁶, the sign, sent by the signifier to the signified through his or her clothes, is expressing a simple economic relationship of power.

In both cases, following trends led to homogeneity. But in the West, this homogeneity was consciously or unconsciously chosen, according to how the consumer reflected on his or her choice and ideals. In the East, the homogeneity was imposed by the state's ideology and by the planned economy which limited the spectrum of trends in the East, where no place was given to subcultures and alternative fashion trends.

2. The missing segment: dissident elites and youth subcultures. The case of the Blue Jeans Generation

A key element of Western fashion is indeed missing from the Soviet fashion magazines: blue jeans, symbol of freedom and capitalism in the West as well as in the East¹⁰⁷. Since the fifties, jeans were scarce products in the Soviet Union; they could cross the borders only through tourist flows or international festivals. The Cold War and its intense cultural competition gave fashion an extra social and political significance, which continuously grew in the years preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even if trafficking jeans to the Soviet space was severely punished,¹⁰⁸ the demand did not decrease, forcing the Soviet power to face this problematic fashion taste. The Soviet Union even invited American brands to help them manufacture

¹⁰⁵ Olga Annanurova "(Im)possible to Try: Notes on Soviet Fashion Photography" *Fashion Theory*, Vol.22, No. 2 (2018)

¹⁰⁶ Roland Barthes *The Fashion System* (Vintage Classic, 2010) pp 226

¹⁰⁷ Alexei Rudevich, "Worth going to prison for: getting hold of jeans in the USSR" *Russia Beyond*, 16 September

2014https://www.rbth.com/arts/2014/09/16/worth_going_to_prison_for_getting_hold_of_jeans_in_the_ussr_39833.html

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

jeans¹⁰⁹. The deal lasted only one year, from 1979 to 1980, after the US team boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

It was in this sensitive cultural context that the dramatic event of the Aeroflot Flight 6833 took place in Georgia, in November 1983¹¹⁰. Seven young Georgians¹¹¹, including one girl, failed to hijack a plane with over 58 passengers in an attempt to leave the Soviet Union. The would-be hijackers were later executed by the regime. This dramatic event has a symbolic value in the late Soviet history of Georgia, but it remains controversial as to whether these young people were heroes of a generation starving for freedom or terrorists. This event has contributed to the conception of fashion as a protest and a demand for freedom in Georgia.

Flight from the USSR by Dato Turashvili, originally published in 1988, narrates their stories. It was later adapted into a movie and as a theatre play, censored during the nineties but currently being played in Tbilisi. The book focuses on the character of Gega Kobkhidze, one of the most famous teenage actors at the time. After the attack, his scenes in different movies were erased by the regime¹¹². He was the son of Mikheil Kobakhidze, a filmmaker who could not shoot movies anymore after his last production was banned by the Soviet regime. All perpetrators came from the intellectual, artistic, and economic elite of Tbilisi, so as the majority of *Stilyagi* before them. They were actors, musicians, painters, and physicians, mastering foreign languages and becoming famous for wearing jeans, a visual expression of their pro-west attitude and tastes. But unlike the *Stilyagi* movement, the Jean Generation carried a political message.

The attack was planned for several months, but the two pilots resisted and disobeyed their orders. They later received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. The Alpha Group, a special counter-terrorism unit of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), aimed at responding to violent acts on public transportation and based in Moscow, was urgently deployed in Tbilisi where the plane landed again after a few

¹⁰⁹ Hella Pick, "From the archive: Kremlin bows to capitalist craze for jeans" *The Guardian* 11st July 2009

¹¹⁰ All names and details are taken from Dato Turashvili's book *Flight from the USSR* which is till today the main source of information on this event available in English

¹¹¹ See fig 3.1, 3.2, 3.3

¹¹² Eva Bolkvadze, "Story of Jean Boys" *Georgian Journal* 05 December 2013
<https://www.georgianjournal.ge/blog/25553-story-of-jeans-boys.html>

hours. On day two of the attack, the Alpha Group killed three of the perpetrators, along with five hostages. The remaining hijackers were later blamed for these casualties.

According to the historian Simon Maskharashvili¹¹³, the hijack was intentionally demonstrative. He argues that these talented and successful young Georgians, all members of wealthy families, could have bought a plane ticket to any Western country and applied for the right of asylum. Their aim was supposedly to confer a strong symbolic value to this terrorist act to reinforce their protest against the regime. It confirms the idea of a greater political awareness and activism in the youth subcultures of the late eighties.

Consequently, the regime's answer was equally symbolic: according to Soviet law, the death sentence for this crime was not the only option for judges. Still, all men of the group were tortured and executed. This included a clergyman, held responsible for the organization of the hijack. At a time when the Soviet regime was trying to marginalize religion from the public sphere, this violent response was deliberate and interpreted by Maskharashvili as a demonstration of the overuse of state power under Eduard Shevardnadze, First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party and de facto leader of Soviet Georgia from 1972 to 1985. The only woman, Tinatin Petviashvili, received a 14-year jail sentence. She was pregnant at the time and forced to abort in prison.

This tragic case is representative of the growing dissident culture in the Soviet Union, fostered by Soviet youth. Fashion goes here beyond the statement of the individualism of the *Stilyagi*. It reflects the radicality of political position against the Soviet Union, to the point that these young Georgians decided to hijack a plane, while they had other means to leave the country. This act has reinforced the symbolic value of their blue jeans, till today.

Without exaggerating their importance in the process leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union, blue jeans, and western-inspired movements in general, have nevertheless played a role in spreading pro-western cultural movements and in uniting those who identified themselves with western values. Nevertheless, the Blue Jean Generation itself was a minority in Soviet countries and in Soviet Georgia. Indeed, a

¹¹³ Interviewed by Madona Siharulidze "The Blue Jeans Generation" *Georgian Journal*, 01 September 2011
<https://www.georgianjournal.ge/society/5769-the-blue-jeans-generation-.html>

pair of jeans on the black market cost around \$275, more than an average month's pay for Georgians at the time.¹¹⁴ Those who had access to them belonged to a narrow economic elite.

Therefore, Soviet fashion magazines were not only targeting a specific economic elite, which could afford the promoted clothes, but also excluded a part of the elite, identified as dissident expressing their position through their clothing choices. The scope of readers, and potential consumers, was therefore reduced to the very minimum. Accordingly, Soviet fashion magazines were no more representative of society than Western magazines. They were just pretending to be representative through inclusive photoshoots.

Jeans and punk fashion were missing from all magazines I had access to, while it was included in Western fashion magazines. Western fashion trends were indeed inspired by these subcultures, thus mainstreaming them through their commodification. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, avoided normalizing a culture which was openly against the established regime. This further highlights the social and political symbolism of fashion in the Soviet Union in comparison to the West, where these alternative cultures served as materials for designers to create new and disruptive fashion trends. Ironically, those who identified themselves as part of Soviet subcultures had no interest in being represented in mainstream fashion magazines either. Indeed, their exclusion further legitimated their claims and differences.

In the next chapter, I will touch upon the role of youth subcultures in the Georgian revolution against the Soviet regime in 1991 and question the state of fashion in a time that was infamous in Georgia as the "Dark Nineties."

¹¹⁴ United Press International "Blue jeans American style in great demand in Russia" 6th December 1981 <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1981/12/06/Blue-jeans-American-style-in-great-demand-in-Russia/3076376462800/>

CHAPTER THREE:

The Dark Nineties: Chaotic time, chaotic looks?

In 1985, two years after the tragic event of the Jeans Generation, Eduard Shevardnadze became the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union, ruled by Mikhail Gorbachev. Together, they represented a new liberal elite, trusted by Western powers in their disruptive and ambitious reform plans, known as the *perestroika* and the *glasnost*¹¹⁵. The two men were praised for their innovative politics and their diplomatic skills¹¹⁶ but at the national level, this liberal turn opened the door to the rise of nationalism, ultimately leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991.¹¹⁷

The consequences for Georgia were dramatic. The decade following independence, signed in March 1991, was characterized by a lasting socio-economic and political crisis, widespread corruption, high level of criminality, and uncontrolled territories and borders. It paved the way to a significant increase in drugs and arms circulating in the country, notably through the Roki tunnel that connects Russia to Georgia through the separatist region of South-Ossetia¹¹⁸¹¹⁹. For the Georgian people, the contrast between the relative prosperity and cultural vibrancy during Soviet time, and the chaos of the nineties, worse in Georgia than in other “post-Soviet” countries¹²⁰,

¹¹⁵ Serge Berstein, Pierre Milza « Des années 1990 à nos jours, vers le monde nouveau du XXI^e siècle » *Histoire du XX^e siècle* (Paris : Initial, 2010)

¹¹⁶ Pierre Razoux, *L'Histoire de la Georgie : la clé du Caucase* (Paris : Perrin, 2009) pp163

¹¹⁷ Michael Mandelbaum, "Coup De Grace: The End of the Soviet Union." *Foreign Affairs* Vol.71, No. 1 (1991)

¹¹⁸ Idib pp164

¹¹⁹ The name “South-Ossetia” is controversial in Georgia, as it stressed the link with the Russian region of North-Ossetia. This region is thus known as the Tskhinvali region in Georgian.

¹²⁰ Gavin Slade, "No Country for Made Men: The Decline of the Mafia in Post-Soviet Georgia." *Law & Society Review* Vol. 46, No. 3 (2012) pp. 623-649

was definitely traumatizing. The nineties became a time of myths, recalled as the “Dark Nineties”.

An interesting article titled “The Soviet Legacy in Contemporary Georgia: A Psycho Traumatological Perspective” published in 2014 by the Georgian scholar Darejan Jana Javakhishvili proposes to use psychology to understand how traumatic events, experienced at the individual and social level, are participating in the identity-building process of Georgia. I apply her analysis to the specific case of the nineties. This approach echoes to the central argument of post-post transition theories, which is the need to reintroduce the moral complexity of “post-Soviet” societies. Indeed, transition theories on the “post-Soviet” space failed to forecast this unprecedented state of anarchy in Georgia, a country which was relatively resistant to the central power of the Kremlin thanks to the presence of local politicians in diverse positions of the Soviet central power and because of its status as the best touristic spot in the USSR¹²¹. Re-integrating cultural specifics are therefore necessary to better understand the situation and its lasting impacts on Georgian society’s self-perception and on the storytelling of the nineties’ inspired “post-Soviet” fashion trends.

Indeed, both the style and the label imply to reflect on the Georgian modern history, which is a complex process in a country that had different psychological strategies to overcome recent trauma. Those who are nowadays adopting the “post-Soviet” style only have childhood memories of the nineties; I argue that the lack of precise details or mature understanding of this period explains the romanticization process at the core of this specific style. This chapter investigates the root causes of this process, through a closer analysis of the social conditions and how they are perceived by individuals. I will thus link objective historical facts to oral histories, which also illustrate and concretize my theoretical framework. Second, I address the actual state of fashion and how it reflects the social and economic realities of this specific time of the Georgian history.

¹²¹ Patrick Dooley « Fabrika and the Corporatization of Tbilisi’s Counter-Culture” *Post-Pravda* 8th May 2017 <http://www.postpravdamagazine.com/fabrika-tbilisi-counter-culture/>

1. *Historical background: 1989 – 2004*

It is commonly assumed that youth is the engine of revolution and social changes. In Soviet Georgia, young adults and students were indeed on the front line in the various rebellions and protests that rhythmized the political life of the country, including the independence revolution of April 1989.¹²² This event, referred to as the April 9th tragedy, was the peak of weeks of smaller protests against the separatist demands of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia; it eventually escalated into an anti-Soviet demonstration, in the context of its progressive disintegration under the pressure of similar movements from Berlin to Erevan. Thousands of people gathered in front of Parliament in the main street of Tbilisi before the Georgian Communist Party called upon the Soviet interior ministry's elite troops.¹²³ Tanks rolled over the barricades and protestors were violently attacked by Soviet soldiers, armed with spades and aerosols: 427 people were injured and 19 died, all young Georgians. 16 of them were women. This event became a symbol of Georgia's martyrdom¹²⁴, feeding the national identity with a narrative of constant struggle against an oppressive power.¹²⁵

According to Javakhishvili, the 9th April is an "unmourned" trauma in Georgia, specifically categorized as a "catastrophic stressor" that affects the society as a whole. This is the most extreme form of stressors, in terms of scale and strength. The author explains:

"Overcoming the trauma of loss requires a process of mourning, which allows one to deal with the emotions related to loss, to find explanation and to put meaning in what has happened, to facilitate an adequate appreciation of what has been lost, and to integrate the psychic representations of their most valued aspects into one's own self"¹²⁶

This mourning time leads to a post-traumatic identity, which progressively "has the effect of freeing society energy from its attachment to the past". The article

¹²² Lisa Anne Goddard, "Georgian Opposition to Soviet Rule (1956-1989) and the Causes of Resentment between Georgia and Russia" (Ohio State University: 2011)

¹²³ Steven Eke, "Georgia recalls Soviet crackdown" *BBC News*, 8 April 2009
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7986282.stm>

¹²⁴ Stephen Francis Jones, *Georgia: A Political History since Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015) pp33

¹²⁵ Darejan Jana Javakhishvili, "The Soviet Legacy in Contemporary Georgia: A Psycho Traumatological Perspective" *Identity Studies in the Caucasus and the Black Sea Region* Vol. 5 2014

¹²⁶ *Ibid* pp 24

demonstrates that Georgia did not have time to process the traumatic experience of the Soviet Union, including the 9th of April, because survival was the priority. It led to a pseudo-mourning, which has transmitted the traumatism from generation to generation, thus shaping the national narrative of martyrdom.

This widespread and lasting traumatic identity leads to instabilities, and possible violence between social groups, which are characteristic of “revengeful mourning”. The inter-ethnic conflicts of the nineties seem to confirm this psychological approach.

Georgia is a pluri-ethnic country composed of Abkhaz, Adjarian and Ossetian minorities, along with Armenians and Azeris¹²⁷. Throughout the complicated history of Georgia, the three first groups were relatively protected from foreign invasions due to their isolated geographical situation from the rest of the country. Accordingly, they enjoyed some degree of autonomy and cultural cohesion, even during the Soviet occupation. Therefore, when Georgia organized its first pluralistic elections in 1990, Abkhazia, Adjara and South-Ossetia elected their own representatives and parliaments. Zviad Gamsakhourdia, the nationalist candidate elected in Tbilisi and supported by extremists and mafia-like business men,¹²⁸ launched an aggressive repression, especially in South-Ossetia where electricity, gas and food supply were interrupted. At the time, Abkhazia was still relatively protected by the Soviet troops stationed in the region. Unlike the two other regions, Adjara did not declare its independence from Georgia, as long as no action was taken against its financial prosperity. It relied mainly on Batumi, the regional capital and the main harbour of Georgia, which developed legal and illegal trade relations with neighbouring Turkey.¹²⁹

Meanwhile, Tbilisi became the theatre of constant fights between irregular forces. The government’s militia split up and opposed each other in an attempt to control the diverse traffics in goods, weapons and drugs that were flooding the country due to the lack of border controls. In 1992, the political opposition became a military junta and took the control of Georgia after several weeks of intense bombing of the Parliament. Gamsakhourdia was forced to leave in January 1992 and was replaced by

¹²⁷ More information available in the website of Minority Rights: <http://minorityrights.org/country/georgia/>

¹²⁸ Pierre Razoux, *L’Histoire de la Georgie : la clé du Caucase* (Paris : Perrin, 2009) pp172

¹²⁹ Ibid pp 180

Shevardnadze, coming back from Moscow. His main task was to get international recognition of Georgia as an independent country.

Because Russia's recognition of Georgia was dependent on the resolution of the South-Ossetian conflict, a ceasefire agreement was found, enforced by a peacekeeping mission monitored by the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe. In July 1992, Georgia became the 179th state of the United Nations. However, this relative success for South-Ossetia, which became a de-facto independent country, triggered the independence movement in Abkhazia. It was the beginning of an open conflict between Abkhaz, Georgians and Russians, which continues to destabilise the region today. Abkhazia plunged into a one-year guerrilla uprising, leading to the massacres and forced displacement of thousands of Georgians, who remain the biggest ethnic group in the region.¹³⁰ Both Georgian and Abkhazian forces, supported and armed by Russia, violated humanitarian law in targeting civilian populations.¹³¹ In September 1993, a ceasefire was signed between all parties, similar to the one enforced in South-Ossetia. It was seen as a Russian political and military success over Georgia. This in turn nourished the anti-Russian sentiment in Georgia till today and developed victimization narrative.

Additionally, the state continued to censor references to dissident cultures, which resonate with the Soviet practices. The theatre play "Jeans Generation" ¹³² was forbidden by Shevardnadze, who was responsible in 1983 for the trial of the airplane hijackers. It was one of many political scandals that undermined his mandate and contributed to the growing frustration of youth and students, ultimately leading to the peaceful Rose Revolution in 2004, led by Mikhail Saakashvili.¹³³

Even with the progressive support of international actors such as the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations, and of Western powers, especially the European Union and the United States¹³⁴, everyday life in Georgia

¹³⁰ Ibid pp 188

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch « Georgia/Abkhazia : Violation so the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict" March 1995

¹³² A documentary, named "Theatre of truth and celebration" directed by Georges Varsimashvili for Rustavi 2 is currently in the making. It combines different archives from the Nineties to uncover the existing tensions surrounding the theatre play named "Jeans Generation". There is first version available on youtube, with english subtitles <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Zlc6Bi68Lg>

¹³³ Pierre Razoux, *L'Histoire de la Georgie : la clé du Caucase* (Paris : Perrin, 2009) pp272

¹³⁴ Ibid pp243

remained extremely difficult throughout the nineties. The population mistrusted the government, which was plagued by widespread corruption, constantly weakened by bargaining with regional strong men¹³⁵ and unable to respond to the most urgent needs for food, electricity, goods and protection. Georgia, which was once known as the best touristic destination in the Soviet Union thanks to its landscapes, culture and lifestyle, was in an unprecedented and lasting confusion.

In psychological terms, this general distress is a combination of “catastrophic stressors”, at the social level, “cumulative stressors”, at the scale of the family and “everyday life strains”¹³⁶, which refers to the fear of the regime, at the individual level. All are inherited from the Soviet time but reinforced by the chaos of the nineties, increasing the complexity of the trauma. To illustrate this point, I will introduce oral histories, which are mostly stories from young Georgians, who only have childhood memories of this period. This confirms the assumption that the social trauma is passing on generation, as argued by Javakhishvili and second, it highlights the mechanisms of the romanticization process.

2. Culture of violence and increased solidarity

Personal stories and memories frequently refer to violence, criminality, and drug addiction but also solidarity. Those elements seem to have deeply impacted the national narrative.

Shaka¹³⁷, who was born in Abkhazia in 1992, shared with me his family story and the struggle of having a newborn baby in a war zone. His mother was driven to a partially destroyed hospital by her brother and his friends, armed with machine guns. I asked why, according to him, the situation in his country was more dramatic than in other “post-Soviet” countries. He answered:

“I don’t know... We were finally independent, we had the chance to take control over our own country. We could have turned the light on, but we preferred to keep in dark. The nineties have awakened the worst instincts in my people.”

¹³⁵ Ibid pp 208

¹³⁶ Darejan Jana Javakhishvili “The Soviet Legacy in Contemporary Georgia: A Psycho Traumatological Perspective” *Identity Studies in the Caucasus and the Black Sea Region* Vol. 5 2014

¹³⁷ Giorgi Shakaia, interviewed in February 2018 in Tbilisi

The people he referred to were also known as the “Lost Generation,”¹³⁸ which in Georgia, is generally associated with crime and drug use. The uncontrolled territories and borders were open doors to traffic in illegal goods¹³⁹ which has logically strengthened the influence of mafias more than in any other “post-Soviet” countries¹⁴⁰. In Georgia, this criminal elite is called “thieves-in-law”. They emerged in 1930 in the prisoner camps of the Gulag and came to protect and develop the black market of the Soviet Union. The opening of borders, the progressive shift to a liberal economy, the constant penury of goods and the need for protection from civilians opened the window of opportunity for these criminals to monopolize the governmental and economic structure of Georgia till the early 2000s.¹⁴¹

Tamuna¹⁴², who is born in 1993 in Russia from a Georgian father and a Russian mother, shared with me an anecdote about her aunt. She was robbed in the early 2000s; the police told her to deal directly with the “thieves-in-law” who may return her something. It shows how these gangs became a substitute to the police, which was extremely corrupted and disorganized.

The “thieves-in-law”, which continues to undermine the relations of Georgia to the EU¹⁴³, became a symbol of the nineties along with heroin, the most visible and destructive traffic flowing from the Roki tunnel¹⁴⁴, sustained by these well-organized networks. Every Georgian person I interviewed had a family story related to drug addiction, often a male parent or a neighbour. From an almost drug-free country with the strictest drug policy in the Soviet bloc¹⁴⁵, Georgia had the highest number of drug addicts in the early 2000s in comparison with its direct neighbours. The South Caucasus Anti-Drug program, funded by the European Union and implemented by the United Nations Development Program, documented in 2004 around 2000 cases of

¹³⁸ According to the report of Alternative Georgia “Drug Situation in Georgia 2003”, part of the South Caucasus Anti-Drug Program, drug users are mostly males aged 31-35.

¹⁴⁰ Gavin Slade, “No Country for Made Men: The Decline of the Mafia in Post-Soviet Georgia” *Law & Society Review* Vol. 46, No. 3 (2012) pp. 623-649

¹⁴¹ Id.

¹⁴² Tamara Makhatadze, interviewed in July 2018 in Tbilisi

¹⁴³ In 2017, the visa liberalization, one of the top objectives of the EU’ Eastern Partnership with Georgia was delayed by some Member States, including Germany and France, because of their concerns regarding Georgian organized crimes, in both the EU and in Georgia. See Jelger Groeneveld “The Problem of Georgian Criminality in the EU” *Georgian Institute of Politics*, 14 July 2017 <http://gip.ge/facing-problem-georgian-criminality-eu/>

¹⁴⁴ The Roki Tunnel, constructed in 1984, connects Russia to Georgia through the separatist region of South-Ossetia

¹⁴⁵ David Otiashvili, Mzia Tabatadze, Nino Balanchivadze, Irma Kirtadze “Policing, massive street drug testing and poly-substance use chaos in Georgia – a policy case study” *Subst Abuse Treat Prev Policy* (2016)

drug abuse in Georgia against 1,275 cases in Azerbaijan and 538 in Armenia.¹⁴⁶ Most of the few governmental programs created to provide social and health support to opioid addicts failed because of the lack of resources. Today, Georgia continues to have a complicated and sensitive relationship to drug use, which remains at the core of the public debate today, with the new generation of dissident culture reclaiming the liberalization of the drug policy.¹⁴⁷

With drugs, poverty and unemployment comes of course petty crime, along with organized mafias. In Tbilisi, there are window bars from the ground floor to the second, third, or sometimes fourth floor.

Shaka explains that there were codes to know, specific sentences and words to use at the right time, with the right person. He always used the word “survive” when mentioning his youth in this “urban jungle”. For him, who grew up without a strong paternal figure, protection comes from the group. It was thus key to always adapt to the crowd, without compromising his values and moral sense, so as not to get into trouble or lose himself in this changing environment. This personal story and the word choices reflect the situation of stress and emergency felt at a broader social scale, as demonstrated in Javakhishvili’s article.

But besides this narrative of violence, all the interviews and conversation I had with Georgian people stress the role of solidarity, and to some extent, romanticism it. Georgia is known for its tight personal networks and informal mutual aid.¹⁴⁸ The constant lack of consumer goods during the Soviet time, along with the communist ideology and the collectivist social project, has further reinforced the role and meaning of communities, like in other “post-Soviet” countries. But it became in Georgia a distinctive aspect of the national identity’s narrative. In an interview for *Post-Pravda Magazine*, Elene Abshidze, co-founder of the bilingual *Danarti* magazine based in Tbilisi, commented on the title of one of the magazine issues, “Surviving the ‘90s”¹⁴⁹:

¹⁴⁶ Eurasianet “Georgia grapples with brewing drug addiction crisis” <https://eurasianet.org/s/georgia-grapples-with-brewing-drug-addiction-crisis>

¹⁴⁷ National Platform for Drug Policy Changes for Humane Drug Policy (2016)

¹⁴⁸ Gavin Slade, “No Country for Made Men: The Decline of the Mafia in Post-Soviet Georgia” *Law & Society Review* Vol.46, No. 3 (2012) pp623-649

¹⁴⁹ Patrick Dodley, “Surviving the ‘90s in Georgia with *Danarti* Co-Editor Elene Abshidze” *Post-Pravda*, 27 March 2018 <http://www.postpravdamagazine.com/surviving-the-90s-in-georgia-with-danarti-co-editor-elene-abashidze/>

“The sense of community was strong, but this also is a very Georgian thing. You can trace this sense of community through the traditional Tbilisi yards and the ways of living in such yards. There is not much of the same sense of community today, which I guess happens when people no longer need to come together that much.”

Another iconic sentence of the nineties in Georgia is “*shuki movida*”, meaning “The lights came on”. Tbilisi had only a few hours of electricity per day, mainly during the night, forcing Georgians to stay awake until late. The electricity network was divided between “official” electricity, for the wealthier families, and unofficial one, flowing through extra cables connected to hospitals and state’s building, made by the rest of population¹⁵⁰.

There is even a punk band, created by a former French diplomat posted in Tbilisi during the nineties, named *Shuki Movida*.¹⁵¹ Elene¹⁵², born in 1993, remembered games organized by Georgian families to make this reality easier for children.

“Those combination of words were something really meaningful for me... I would say it had two dimensions, negative and positive... I was around 4-5 years old so when the light was off all the time I was very scared. There was nothing we could do, so all the members of the family were gathering in one room; I loved this moment of unity and since they had a spare time they have been playing with us. No matter the room was cold without electricity it was full of warm emotions. Sometimes light was coming back and all family members all together were screaming “*shuki movida*”. It was time for happiness of course, while we, the children, knew the game was over and our parents will run to do some stuff until light was on.”

This mix of negative and positive emotions is characteristic of nineties stories and has contributed to the romanticization of this period, expressed in the current youth culture and in its corresponding fashion looks.

¹⁵⁰ This information came from different interviews, there is no English articles discussing this issue.

¹⁵¹ Lauren Ninoshvili « The 1990s « Kutaisi Wave”: Music and Youth Movement in a Postindustrial Periphery” *Current Musicology*, No. 91 (Spring 2011)

¹⁵² Elene Panchulidze, interviewed in July 2018 in Tbilisi

3. *Chaotic looks?*

“We had more important things to care about than fashion,” commented one of the designers I interviewed. The conversations I had with different people confirmed this statement. In this state of constant penury of goods, clothes were no exception. I did not find any sources on the fashion industry at the time and how it transitioned from the Soviet planning system. However, the current nineties-inspired trends mirror what was the overall aesthetic of the time, which fill the lack of documentation.

In Western Europe, nineties fashion was shaped by a new movement, introduced by designers from the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Arts who create the disruptive concepts of anti-fashion and minimalism in order to underline the excess and the limits of the capitalist fashion industry. It appeared to me that in Georgia, anti-fashion was not a concept but rather a reality, arising from necessity.

Anti-fashion can be described as an anarchist mix of high and low fashion from different trends and time periods.¹⁵³ This style emerged from a revolt, rejecting the money-oriented aspect of fashion. The first recognizable style of anti-fashion was the nihilist grunge movement. The philosophy is about disappearing, as opposed to appearing, thus contradicting the frivolous characteristic of fashion. This style is mostly popular among rebellious youth, who used vintage clothes found in flea markets and charity shops to create this edgy aesthetics. Later came the minimalist movement, characterized by gender-fluid clothes, refined and strict cuts and neutral colours.

In Georgia, the only clothes available in the nineties were first the left-over of the Soviet time -which were also pretty minimalist as already discussed. Vintage shops became more popular, not because it was trendy but because one had to re-use former collections to simply get dressed. The other option was for people to sew their own clothes. Till today, a lot of Georgians enjoy making their own clothes, either by sewing them or by printing their own visuals on their t-shirt and hoodies. This what makes the recent nineties' inspired trends authentic and ultimately explains the success of the “post-Soviet” aesthetic abroad.

¹⁵³ See Arte France *Antifashion* directed by Olivier Nicklaus available on youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kle_IPRtNs&t=198s

The progressive development of trade relations with the neighbouring countries, especially Turkey, an important market for counterfeit and knock-off Western brands, mainstreamed foreign products, previously forbidden by the Soviet regime. The most popular trends was sportswear brands, and in particular Adidas. It was already really trendy during the Soviet time, when the German label provided the kits of the USSR's 1980 Olympic team¹⁵⁴. Georgia soon started producing knock-off Adidas for the whole Soviet Union. These outfits were a must-have, as much as a pair of jeans. Because it was practical, cheap and comfy, the popularity of sportswear, and of Adidas in particular, continued to grow in the suburban environment of nineties' Tbilisi. It later became a symbol of the small criminals and unemployed "post-Soviet" youth¹⁵⁵, known in Russia as *gopnik*.¹⁵⁶

The nineties anti-fashion aesthetic, along with the revival of sportswear, has recently made a comeback in the fashion scene of many countries. It opened a large window of opportunities for Georgian designers to narrate, through fashion, their own version of the nineties, largely inspired from their social history. Indeed, at the core of the "post-Soviet" fashion trends is the aestheticization of lower classes, which reflects the social conditions of this dark time in an ironical way. It thus legitimates the focus of this chapter on the actual and perceived social and cultural changes. Interestingly, this is this type of fashion, which brings low fashion to the high level that marks the breakthrough the Georgian fashion abroad. However, fashion in Georgia goes beyond this specific fashion trend and many designers found this "post-Soviet" label reductive, even offensive when used by Westerners. The debate boils down to how fashion reflects on the Georgian recent history and what kind of national identity designers aim to project to an international audience. It echoes to the complex process of mourning introduced by Darejan Jana Javakhishvili on how a society makes sense to itself through meanings and representations.

Therefore, the next chapter questions the development of the new Georgian fashion industry, how Georgian fashion became popular at home and on a larger

¹⁵⁴ Anastasiia Fedorova, "Adidas, a love story: How Russians fell for the iconic three stripes" *The Calvert Journal* <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/8676/adidas-brand-russia-rubchinskiy>

¹⁵⁵ Sasha Raspopina "Opinion : Can Slav and gopnik memes do real damage" *The Calvert Journal*, 13 December 2016 https://www.calvertjournal.com/opinion/show/7350/gopniks-slavs-squatting-memes?fb_comment_id=1259423250812223_1731212423633301

¹⁵⁶ The closest translation in English would be "chav"

geographical scale, and what social realities it reflects. It thus addresses the debate around the “post-Soviet” aesthetic and what this controversy says about the narrative identity of Georgia.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Georgian Fashion: questioning the “post-Soviet” label

The state of the fashion industry in the last decade has opened a large window of opportunity for Georgian fashion, and the actors of the industry have used it strategically. *Business of Fashion*, which is a worldwide reference for all actors of the fashion industry, noted two main trends that have shaped the international fashion market lately. First, there is a noticeable shift in consumers’ tastes and expectations, as they now value authenticity and individuality even more.¹⁵⁷ Second, there is a growing importance of new fashion scenes in non-Western countries, especially in Africa, Asia, and Eastern European countries.¹⁵⁸

This chapter focuses on how these opportunities were used by the actors of the Georgian fashion industry to project their creative narrative outside of Georgia’s borders. It thus investigates the meaning and use of the controversial label of “post-Soviet” fashion. The rejection or appropriation of the term seems to vary between the different cultures that structure Georgian society. These competing discourses highlight the complexity of the cultural matrix of Georgia today and of its national identity. I will conclude by reflecting on why fashion is a useful tool in terms of cultural diplomacy for Georgia.

¹⁵⁷ Imran Amed, Achim Berg and all “The State of Fashion 2018.” *Business of Fashion*, 2017 https://cdn.businessoffashion.com/reports/The_State_of_Fashion_2018_v2.pdf

¹⁵⁸ Id.

I. The top-down development of Georgian fashion

1. *Georgian Beaumonde*

As already stated, the Soviet time and the nineties in Georgia were characterized by a constant penury of consumer goods, including clothes. It was thus common for everyday citizens to know how to sew, either to make their own clothes or to reuse older ones to prolong their life and pass it to the next generation.

I argue that this context has paved the way for a new Georgian fashion industry to grow in the early 2000s thanks to a skilled labour force and to a new elite. Zura Mgaloblishvili is the brand manager of *Avtandil*¹⁵⁹, considered as the first established Georgian brand after the Soviet Union, created in 2000¹⁶⁰. Answering a question¹⁶¹ on the differences between the 2000s and the situation today, in the Georgian fashion industry, he noted that it was at the time easier to start a brand, because the whole industry had to be rebuilt from scratch. However, few had the financial opportunities or the right network, in a changing economic and social context, to do it. Therefore, high fashion was a niche activity in Georgia, led by a small circle of designers and consumers, also known as the *Georgian Beaumonde*¹⁶². In the early 2000s, fashion was the privilege of the very few.

Indeed, the economic and political context of the time has empowered a new elite, defined by its greater contact with the West in the context of globalization.¹⁶³ The Rose Revolution in 2004 is often analysed as the result of tensions between older and new elites¹⁶⁴, the latter represented by Mikhail Saakashvili, a young and ambitious politician who actively looked for support in Europe and in the United States, calling the Georgian diaspora to come back and to invest in their home country.¹⁶⁵ This *Beaumonde* is the main target of Georgian designers, who produce clothes that reflect

¹⁵⁹ See fig 4.4

¹⁶⁰ According to Avantadil's official website <http://site.avtandil.com/>

¹⁶¹ Zura Mgaloblishvili, brand manager of *Avtandil*, interviewed in March 2018 in Tbilisi

¹⁶² Salomé Mikashavidze, former PR manager of *Matériel*, interviewed in March 2018 in Tbilisi

¹⁶³ Ghia Nodia, Alvaro Pinto Scholtbach *The Political Landscape of Georgia* [Eburon Academic Publishers 2006] pp82

¹⁶⁴ Revolution as elite change is a classic argument in scholarly literature, best theorized by the social scientist Vilfredo Pareto in his book *The Mind and Society* (1935)

¹⁶⁵ Ghia Nodia, Alvaro Pinto Scholtbach *The Political Landscape of Georgia* [Eburon Academic Publishers 2006] pp85

the tastes and lifestyle of this western-educated and anglophone minority.¹⁶⁶ Abroad, Georgian brands are mainly popular among Russian, Kazakh and Azeri customers¹⁶⁷, and overall in Eastern Europe, continuing the history of cultural links of these countries to Georgia.¹⁶⁸

In a nutshell, the early years of Georgian high fashion confirm George Simmel's theory¹⁶⁹, who argued that fashion is mainly driven by the economic elite in a modern capitalist state. The cost of designer clothes excludes lower social classes from high fashion. Also, according to Simmel, this elite set their own trends in an attempt to distinguish themselves from the masses; this is relevant for Georgia, where the political and economic elite of the country worked to end the chapter of the Dark Nineties and to promote a new face of Georgia abroad, thus refusing the streetwear codes, which were popular at the time in lower social classes.

2. Giving back to the people: high fashion made accessible and tailor-made for the Georgian mass market.

Thus, looking only at high fashion does not give a complete picture of the state of fashion in the country, nor does it explain the recent boom of Georgian brands in Georgia and at the international level.

At the national level, the growing reputation of Georgian fashion was fostered by its progressive democratization, for both designers and consumers. These combined dynamics on both the supply and the demand side have led to the democratization, and thus popularity, of Georgian fashion in Georgia.

On the supply side, the turning point in Georgian fashion was in the second half of the 2010s, when the closed circle of Georgian designers opened to new talents by providing them with business opportunities to expand their brands. The best example is the former *Soviet Fashion House Materia*, who took the name *Matériel*¹⁷⁰ in 2012. In their own words: *"The line aids the evolution of Georgian fashion scene by giving*

¹⁶⁶ Kornely Kakachia a. all, 25 Years of Independent Georgia: Achievements and Unfinished Projects (Tbilisi: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung & Ilia State University Press, 2016) pp33

¹⁶⁷ Salomé Mikashavidze, former PR manager of *Matériel*, interviewed in March 2018 in Tbilisi

¹⁶⁸ According to every designers and brand managers' interviews and to the participation of Georgian brands to fashion weeks abroad

¹⁶⁹ Georg Simmel, "Fashion" *International Quarterley*, Vol. 10 (1904) pp134

¹⁷⁰ See fig 4.10

*opportunities to young and up and coming designers to expand their possibilities and talent.*¹⁷¹ The company provides them with production facilities, fabrics, labour forces, public relations and business support.¹⁷² The production is entirely based and controlled in Georgia, and all items are crafted in Tbilisi in the Materia factory.

Moreover, it has also participated in the linkages of the Georgian creative community, bounded by their kinship. All interviewees have stressed the sense of solidarity in the fashion scene; during fashion shows, it is common to see designers helping each other, which rarely happened in Western countries where fashion is known for being a very competitive business. One of the designers reported that a foreign journalist was shocked to see other designers helping in the backstage of the fashion shows. As previously mentioned, the role of community has always been a distinctive aspect of the Georgian society; it is thus no surprise to find it in fashion as well. This unity within the Georgian fashion scene appears as one of the key explanatory variables in its current success.¹⁷³

In parallel, on the demand side, *Matériel*, along with other high-fashion brands, opened their second line with the aim to make their design more accessible to the growing middle-class. During my interviews, the words “*giving back to the people*” were often used when explaining the reasons behind this business plan. The prices are aligned with those found in Zara or H&M, two worldwide fast-fashion retailers, known to propose accessible and varied clothes to a wide range of consumers. To compete with these two foreign and powerful actors of the fashion scene, the second lines of the Georgian high fashion brands stress their local anchorage and the Georgian *savoir-faire*. *Dots*, the second line of *Matériel* opened in 2016, chose the slogan “*Wear Georgian*”.

Moreover, second lines are tailor-made for the Georgian taste, unlike premium lines which target international customers. Beka Gvishiani, brand manager for *Anouki*¹⁷⁴, explained how the creative process of the brand is adapted to the different audiences. *Anouki*, created in 2013, is one of the most successful brands abroad with

¹⁷¹ See Matériel’s website:

http://materieltbilisi.com/index.php?route=information/information&information_id=4

¹⁷² Anastasiia Fedorova “Matériel: the fashion factory behind Georgia’s stylistic evolution” *The Calvert Journal*

¹⁷³ Anastasiia Fedorova “Georgia’s new fashioni are packs are the trend-setters you need to follow” *The Calvert Journal* <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/8186/fashion-capitals-tbilisi>

¹⁷⁴ See fig 4.3

several shops in Asia, Western Europe and soon in the United States and in Australia. Its feminine, colourful, and sparkly aesthetic is inspired by the personality and tastes of its designer, Anouki Areshidze. She is a local celebrity in Georgia, married to Kakhaber Kaladze, a former footballer and current mayor of Tbilisi. Unlike other Georgian designers, the brand does not seek inspiration in the past. When creating a new collection, half of the designs answer to clear buyers' requests. In Asian countries, the sparkly signature of the brand is very much appreciated. But for the local market, *Anouki* has recently opened its second line, *Miss Anouki*, which proposes more minimalistic pieces, in a neutral palette of colours, closer to Georgian tastes. It is interesting to see that these buyers' preferences echo the norms set by the Soviet fashion industry regarding colours and cuts. The clothes are marked with the tag "*Made With Love in Georgia*".

In the context of globalisation, Georgia is certainly not the only country to promote its *savoir-faire* and to encourage consumers to buy local. This market strategy is also known as "glocalization"¹⁷⁵. There is an abundant literature on this topic¹⁷⁶¹⁷⁷¹⁷⁸¹⁷⁹¹⁸⁰, which would be relevant for further researches on the Georgian fashion industry, from a business perspective. From an historical point of view, this local anchorage of Georgian brands, turned into a marketing argument, also reflects the revival of the national identity freed from the Soviet past.¹⁸¹

This local anchorage, added to the opening of the circle of designers and the democratization of Georgian brands through lower prices and adapted lines, are all key in understanding the recent boom of Georgian fashion at the national level.

In terms of prices, these brands are comparable to Western fashion lines, displaying elegant and classy styles. In this context, the two fashion weeks, Tbilisi

¹⁷⁵ Stefano Tartaglia and Monica Rossi, "The Local Identity Functions in the Age of Globalization: A Study on a Local Culture" *Community Psychology in Global Perspective*. Vol 1, Issue 1 (2015) pp. 105 – 121

¹⁷⁶ Yi Wang, "Globalization Enhances Cultural Identity" *Intercultural Communication Studies* Vol. 19 No. 1 (2007)

¹⁷⁷ Mohammad Shamsuddoha, "Glocalization: A Theoretical Analysis." *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2009)

¹⁷⁸ Victor Roudometof "Transnationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Glocalization" *Current Sociology* Vol 53, Issue 1, pp. 113 – 135 (2005)

¹⁷⁹ George Ritzer, "Rethinking Globalization: Glocalization/Globalization and Something/Nothing" *Sociological Theory* Vol 21, Issue 3, pp. 193 – 209 (2003)

¹⁸⁰ Amir Rosenmann, Gerhard Reese, and James E. Cameron, "Social Identities in a Globalized World: Challenges and Opportunities for Collective Action" *Perspectives on Psychological Science* Vol 11, Issue 2, pp. 202 – 221 (2016)

¹⁸¹ Kornely Kakachia a. all, 25 Years of Independent Georgia: Achievements and Unfinished Projects (Tbilisi: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung & Ilia State University Press, 2016)

Fashion Week created in 2009 and the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week created in 2015, gave extra local and international legitimacy to Georgian fashion. They create a platform for commercial networking among designers, buyers and journalists. Like in other countries, fashion weeks pace the different trends and give the opportunities for new designers to increase their reputation and expand their business. In short, this is a commercial type of fashion that did not really exist in Georgia before the second half of the years 2010.

Although more accessible, these lines target a mostly young feminine audience with a higher purchasing power than the average. From 2004 to 2016, the overall growth of the average monthly nominal earning increased from 156,6 lari to 940 lari¹⁸², which equals €325,31. It confirms the growth of the middle-class, which is the targeted audience of the designer's second lines. However, on *Dots*' website for instance, the prices of coats start at 385 lari, which is almost half of the monthly income of the average Georgian employee. Buying clothes in second lines' shops is thus exceptional for most of the Georgian buyers.

3. Street-fashion: the everyday Georgian style

At the beginning of my stay in January 2018, when I told my friend Ilia that I was here to do research on fashion, he answered: "First of all, before talking about high fashion and designer clothes, you need to go to the bazaar, where normal people get their clothes -or you will not understand what Georgian fashion is and means". As I aim to give a complete picture of Georgian fashion, this advice was very much needed.

The central market of Tbilisi, situated near the National Stadium at the Station Square subway station, is till today the biggest bazaar for clothes shopping. There are all kinds of people, from different age groups, all wearing different styles, picking up clothes according to their own tastes and budget. Today, the bazaar is organized in two distinct sections. The first one is for the knock-off brands, dominated by sportswear brands, where most of the sellers are men. The second part, adjacent to a large butcher shop, is dedicated to vintage clothes¹⁸³, imported from many different countries,

¹⁸² According to the date of the National Statistics Office of Georgia available at http://www.geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=149&lang=eng

¹⁸³ See fig 4.1

according to their tag. Here, most of the sellers are women, and a big majority of the clothes there are for females. Around this market one can find other smaller vintage shops. Shopping there consists in plunging in a disorganized pile of clothes before negotiating prices. There are no fitting rooms, no mirrors, which makes the shopping experience very different from the one in Western countries or from the designer shops of the city centre, in the touristic parts of Tbilisi. Obviously, Tbilisi's bazaar¹⁸⁴ is not part of the fashion shows and does not answer to any commercial or marketing strategy.

The bazaar is the place where foreign influences in clothes hit the Georgian mass market after years of Soviet embargo/place for mainstreaming too, because the western trends in high fashion are just not accessible. The knock-offs brands are mostly from China and Turkey, reproducing well-known Western streetwear brands. With the rising popularity of Georgian fashion, which remains too expensive for the majority of Georgian buyers, fake copies of Georgian designers' clothes or accessories appeared in the bazaar. For instance, the famous pair of glasses from George Keburia¹⁸⁵, worn by world famous American models and celebrities like Bella Hadid, Solange and Rihanna,¹⁸⁶ can be found for less than three euros on the market, while it originally costs €187¹⁸⁷. Zurab Mgaloblishvili, the brand manager of *Avtandil*, also regrets to find copies of his brand on the market but notes that there is not much designers can do about it, as many low-income sellers are relying on these products to sustain their businesses.

Ultimately, the bazaar has also contributed to the mainstreaming of Georgian fashion and created this curious mix of high and low fashion, which has become a distinctive trait of the Georgian style. Beside the various aesthetics of Georgian designers, it is this particular street fashion style that became popular abroad. The Zurich-based Georgian designer Demna Gvasalia became the ambassador of this so-called "post-Soviet" fashion, thus putting Georgia on the map of the international

¹⁸⁴ See fig 4.2

¹⁸⁵ See fig 4.7 and 4.8

¹⁸⁶ Anastasiia Fedorova, "Meet the designer behind the tiny sunglasses seen on RiRi and Solange" *Dazed and Confused*, 11 January 2018 <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/9156/new-east-100-materiel-tbilisi>

¹⁸⁷ As found in the luxury fashion retail platform Farfetch:
<https://www.farfetch.com/fr/shopping/women/george-keburia/sunglasses-1/items.aspx>

fashion industry. However, making poor fashion trendy, and moreover, making it the mainstream visual identity of Georgia abroad is rather controversial.

II. The controversy of the post-soviet aestheticism

1. *The “post-Soviet” style: low fashion turned high*

At the international level of fashion, the year 2016 was marked by the revival and reinterpretation of nineties fashion.¹⁸⁸ But because fashion is, paradoxically, driven by a constant search for novelty and disruption from past trends, the timing was right for Eastern European countries to sell their alternative version of the nineties. Therefore, 2016 was also the year of the rise of a new and disruptive aesthetic labelled as “post-Soviet” fashion,¹⁸⁹ led by three designers from the former Soviet bloc: the Russians Gosha Rubchinskiy and Lotta Volkova, and Demna Gvasalia, from Georgia. Demna studied at the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Art, known for bringing the anti-fashion trends in the nineties. He brought his own Georgian influence and streetwear aesthetic to long-established French owned fashion houses¹⁹⁰, won several prestigious fashion awards¹⁹¹ and organized the first runway of his own label, *Vetements*, at Paris Fashion Week in 2014. *Dazed and Confused* magazine called his brand a “game-changing collective”¹⁹² and *i-D magazine* named him “the star of the Paris fashion revolution”¹⁹³. Demna used his Parisian reputation to bring his own story-telling of Georgia under the spotlight of the fashion industry. But what kind of national narrative is he actually displaying? What does “post-Soviet” fashion refer to?

¹⁸⁸ Alexander Fury, “The Return of the ‘90s” *The New York Times Style Magazine*, 13 July 2016
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/t-magazine/fashion/90s-fashion-revival.html>

¹⁸⁹ Alec Leach, “Why 2016 was the Year of Post-Soviet Fashion..” *Highsnobiety*, 28 December 2016
<https://www.highsnobiety.com/2016/12/28/post-soviet-fashion-vetements-gosha/>

¹⁹⁰ Demna Gvasalia worked for Marison Martin Margiela, Louis Vuitton and Balenciaga, all French owned luxury fashion houses.

¹⁹¹ International Ready-To-Wear Designer in 5th December 2016 and the Council of Fashion Designers of American Fashion Awards in March 2017

¹⁹² Jake Hall, “What happened at Vetements’ couture debut” *Dazed and Confused*, 3 July 2016
<http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/31880/1/what-happened-at-vetements-couture-debut>

¹⁹³ Ander Christian Madsen, “The French Revolution” *i-D Magazine*, 4 March 2016
https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/zmx5ax/the-french-revolution

First, the label “post-Soviet” is a foreign invention, made for the ease of characterisation of a relatively unknown geographical area in the international fashion scene¹⁹⁴. As previously noted, in the early years of Georgian fashion, foreign buyers came mainly from Eastern Europe or Central Asian countries. The few brands, which found customers elsewhere, adopted a global market strategy, proposing collections that were in line with the buyers’ requests; their visual identity cannot be immediately traced back to Georgia. Moreover, none of these brands mirrored the Georgian streetstyle as found around Tbilisi’s bazaar, unlike Demna’s collection for both *Vetements*¹⁹⁵ and *Balenciaga*¹⁹⁶. Therefore, actors of the Georgian fashion industry regret that this label is sometimes used as a catch-all category for all designers coming from the post-Soviet area, while they proposed collections that do not align with this particular aesthetic¹⁹⁷. From my interviews and observation of the Georgian fashion sense, it seems more accurate to use the label “post-Soviet” fashion to refer to specific style of streetwear, inspired by the nineties as experienced in the former Soviet bloc, rather than to all new creators coming from the former Soviet Union.

Designers or buyers of this type of fashion are using fashion to project their own troubled history and the chaotic fashion that came with it. This style displays the same looks found in the nineties in Georgia; a confusing mix of the leftover from the Soviet time with an abundance of consumer logos from Western sportswear brands. This is the aestheticization and commodification of low fashion. At the core of this aesthetic is the figure of the suburban youth, unemployed and slightly aggressive, left jobless after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In English, this stereotype would be called “chav” or “white-trash” in American English. Model agencies have noted a new trend in the casting of models, with international brands specifically asking for models who look like Russian criminals.¹⁹⁸

In the opposite of the logic of the Soviet time, Eastern European trends became an inspiration for Western fashion, thus putting former Soviet countries like Georgia

¹⁹⁴ Anastasiia Fedorova, “Post-Soviet fashion : Identity, history and the trend that changed the industry” *The Calvert Journal* October 2016 <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/9685/post-soviet-visions-fashion-aesthetics-gosha-demna-lotta-vetements>

¹⁹⁵ See fig 4.13

¹⁹⁶ See fig 4.6

¹⁹⁸ Adrianna Janiszewska, from the Rock Men Model Agency in Paris, interviewed by Tudor, Elisabeta.

“Pourquoi l’esthétique communistes est à la mode” in *L’Express Styles*, 09 Decembre 2012

https://www.lexpress.fr/styles/createurs/pourquoi-l-esthetique-communiste-est-a-la-mode_1858104.html

on the map. By romanticizing the Dark Nineties through fashion, “post-Soviet” fashion is selling a myth to Western consumers looking for authenticity and exoticism. This is a major rupture in the lasting logic of diffusion of international fashion. Second, although the development of fashion in Georgia followed a top-down logic from the elite to the mass-market, the breakthrough of Georgian fashion at the international level is reversing this dynamic by making “poor” fashion trendy. This is the most interesting aspect of Georgian fashion as far as it contradicts the main theory of fashion and elite as expressed by George Simmel.

Indeed, according to Simmel, new trends appear because of their disrupting character, but are always launched by the economic elite in an attempt to distinguish itself from the masses. Through imitation and repetition, these trends become popular for a larger public. However, Simmel did not take into consideration that some groups, within the mass market, adopt the same logic of disruption because the mainstreamed fashion codes are ultimately a reflection of the elite’s visual identity. This led to the development of a subculture which consciously resist to the cultural hegemony of the elite through their special choices in clothes.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, this alternative style became appealing for both local and western elite seeking for authenticity and disruption, thus copying the fashion sense of lower social classes and underground culture.

In a nutshell, the mainstreaming of poor fashion blurs the lines between ordinary and dissident, authentic and derivative, and ultimately, between high and low social classes.

2. Commercialization of the subculture?

By playing with aesthetic norms of high and low fashion and challenging Western beauty standards, “post-Soviet” fashion is a form a visual provocation. This style is indeed mainly popular among Georgians who identify with the new form of counter-culture fostered by underground nightclubs and bars, which became a symbol of freedom for sexual minorities.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Robert T. Wood, “The Straightedge Youth Sub-Culture: Observations on the Complexity of Sub-Cultural Identity” *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 6, No.1 (2003)

²⁰⁰ Zviad Gelbakhiani, Tato Getia “How a Techno Party is Making Tbilisi a Rave Destination” *Electronicbeats* 20 October 2016 <http://www.electronicbeats.net/club-feature-bassiani-tbilisi-georgia/>

Plus, the reference to the Dark Nineties, a period marked by violence and oppression, suits the new generation of Georgians, close to or part of dissident youth culture growing in Tbilisi. As previously noted, during the Soviet time, Georgian subculture used fashion to protest against oppressive Soviet norms; today, the Georgian conservative mindset towards sexual liberation and gender fluidity²⁰¹, fostered by the renewed importance of the Church²⁰² after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is perceived as a new form of oppression for the new generation, born after the Soviet Union²⁰³.

The most explicit example was the rave organized in front of the Parliament on the 14th of May 2018 after the closure of *Bassiani*, the most well-known underground club in Georgia²⁰⁴ and Café Gallery, allegedly to find drugs dealers.²⁰⁵ In reality, the dealers were arrested ahead of the raids by police forces in the clubs,²⁰⁶ which confirmed the assumption that the whole operation was an intimidation of the underground culture for its resistance to conservative norms.²⁰⁷ Here, there seem to be some similarities in the oppression of alternative lifestyles and behaviours by the government with the situation during the Soviet time. On the second day of the protest the peaceful crowd of demonstrators was surrounded by aggressive Georgian nationalists and ultra-orthodox.²⁰⁸

²⁰¹ Zaza Bourassa, "Tbilisi is Fucking: Documenting Tbilisi's New Sexual Confidence With Omara Gogichaishvili" *PostPravda*, December 2017

<http://www.postpravdamagazine.com/tbilisi-documenting-sexual-awaking-omara-omara-gogichaishvili>

²⁰² In 2017, The Georgian Orthodox Church was the most trusted institution in Georgia according to the "Survey of Public Opinion in Georgia" by the Center for Insights in Survey Research

²⁰³ Rayhan Demytri and Ed Ram "Georgia's Rave Revolution" *BBC News*, 30 July 2018

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-44999599/georgia-s-rave-revolution>

²⁰⁴ Gillian Sagnsky "Deep Inside Bassiani, the Darkest Underground Club in the World" *W Magazine* May 2017

<https://www.wmagazine.com/story/bassiani-techno-club-tbilisi-georgia>

²⁰⁵ Lorraine Vaney, "We Dance Together, We Fight Together: la Rave-évolution de Tbilisi" *CrossWorlds* 15 May 2018 <http://crossworlds.fr/we-dance-together-we-fight-together-la-rave-olution-de-tbilisi/>

²⁰⁶ "Public Defender: alleged drug dealers arrested before Tbilisi nightclub raids" *OC Media*, 13 May 2018

<http://oc-media.org/public-defender-alleged-drug-dealers-arrested-before-tbilisi-nightclub-raids/>

²⁰⁷ William Dunbar, "Bassiani's come down: the Rise and Fall of White Noise and Tbilisi" *The Calvert Journal*, 18 July 2018 <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/10500/bassiani-come-down-white-noise-raveolution-tbilisi-georgia>

²⁰⁸ Matthew Collin, "Georgian techno fans and extremists clash in Tbilisi in fight for club culture" *The Guardian*, 14 May 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/may/14/georgian-techno-fans-extremists-clash-tbilisi-fight-club-culture>

Shaka, is working for *Bassiani*. I asked him why he has chosen to adopt this “post-Soviet” style of fashion, made of sportswear brands and vintage outfits found in the bazaar. He answered the following:

“For a long time, I was dressing up in a hippie style, made of harem joggers, dyed, colourful T-shirt and wearing dreadlocks. At the time, that was my way to reject the violence of the Georgian society, by promoting peace and love. Then I realized that this style did not represent who I am, it did not talk about where I come from. I started wearing those sport brands I used to have in the nineties, and in the early 2000s, back when I grew up in the ghetto of Tbilisi. Instead of rejecting this dark time, I am romanticizing it to make it more actual. In both cases, my style has always been a protest. Today it is against this conservative Georgian mindset.”

This statement echoes the argument made in the first chapter of this thesis, stating that fashion is a way to express one’s individual identity. Interestingly, there seems to be a parallel between the Soviet time and today. In both cases, self-expression through fashion is seen as a protest. The difference is that for the first time in the Georgian recent history, the alternative style of dissident cultures has become an accepted fashion trend and an integral part of the Georgian identity narrative sold abroad.

Indeed, with the democratization of fashion, underground culture and fashion became more closely linked. Georgian designers such as Gola Damian²⁰⁹ or Irakli Rusadze for *Situationist*²¹⁰, who fit into the “post-Soviet” fashion’s category with their gender-fluid and nineties inspired collections, have strong connections to the club culture in Tbilisi. Irakli Rusadze produces t-shirts for *Bassiani*, where he held one of his fashion shows. The last *Vetements* collection, held in Paris in July 2018, presented some clothes printed with the words “*We Dance Together, We Fight Together*”²¹¹, which was the slogan of the rave-protest held in front of Parliament.

However, the link between “post-Soviet” fashion and underground culture should not be exaggerated. As the *Stilyagi* example has demonstrated, some choose to follow a certain style more in order to socialize within a group than to hold political

²⁰⁹ See fig 4.9

²¹⁰ See fig 4.11

²¹¹ See fig 4.17

demands. This socialization aspect is an integral part of fashion, which is also constitutive of human nature. Plus, the fact that this dissident culture is now commodified, unlike the *Stilyagi* movement, further diminished the authenticity of the group's identity while turning it into the new cool and edgy trend to follow. This is a recurrent debate when addressing the stylization of subculture movements, because it ultimately leads to a paradoxical commercialization of an initially alternative lifestyle, thus denying its alternativeness and diminishing its creative energy²¹².

III. Fashion as a cultural tool for Georgia

1. *The irony of the success of the “post-Soviet” aesthetic abroad*

The commercialization of a subculture's identity and the aestheticization of lower social classes made the success of Georgian fashion abroad, but it is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it breaks the divide between social classes by reversing the top-down logic of fashion, and legitimates the subculture visual identity, but on the other hand, it participates in the stereotyping of the poorer part of the society and neutralized the protest of the counterculture.

In fact, this irony of “post-Soviet” fashion, which makes dressing “poor” expensive, has been proven to be a successful marketing strategy, but it was also offensive for some. The best example is the *Balenciaga's* market bag²¹³, whose copy found in the bazaar is sold for less than one euro in Tbilisi, but costs more than 900 euros when bought in luxury retail shops²¹⁴. In an interview for *Business of Fashion*, Demna Gvasalia himself notes that “*there is a thin line between irony and sarcasm and I have to be careful not to overstep it*”.²¹⁵ Aleks Eror, a fashion journalist born in

²¹² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 2011)

²¹³ See fig 4.5

²¹⁴ Emma Spedding, “So who is buying Balenciaga's 975£ Bazar' market stall shopper bags?” *The Telegraph*, 23 August 2016
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/fashion/people/who-is-buying-balenciagas-975-bazar-thai-market-stall-shopper-ba/>

²¹⁵ Anja Aronowksy Cronberg, “Demna Gvasalia on Authenticity, Irony and Resistance” *Business of Fashion*, 20 December 2017
<https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/people/demna-gvasalia-on-authenticity-irony-and-resistance>

the former Yugoslavia, wrote an article²¹⁶ questioning the ethics of post-Soviet fashion. In his own words:

“Post-Soviet fashion takes visual signifiers of misfortune, scrubs away the misery, and repackages it for the amusement of well-to-do Westerners and the profit that their purchasing power brings.”

This statement stresses that fashion is for some an eccentricity or a disguise, while it is the everyday reality of others. The issue is that while putting Georgia on the map, the “post-Soviet” style may have perpetuated prejudices from Western buyers towards Eastern Europeans. The label is thus perceived as reductive and caricatural.

The fact that Georgian fashion integrates or rejects the “post-Soviet” label shows the differing perceptions of national identity as expressed in fashion. For some, the specifics of Georgian recent history are an inspiration and a way to rise to the global fashion scene, reclaiming, in a positive and playful way, the darkest pages of Georgian history. For others, the Soviet and “post-Soviet” codes appear unnecessary in the national narrative, as their identity exists beyond their reference to the past. The common point is that the relationship to Georgian recent history is at the core of the creative process of Georgian designers and of the communication strategy of Georgian brands abroad.

2. *Georgia beyond post-Sovietism*

Trends stop being fashionable when repetitively reproduced and mainstreamed, and the “post-Soviet” style makes no exception. As an example, Gosha Rubchinskiy, the Russian designer who launched the “post-Soviet” trend, announced in April 2018 that he will stop his eponymous brand and start working on a new project.²¹⁷ Demna Gvasalia himself, in his last *Vetements* collection presented in Paris in July 2018, seemed to have transformed his narrative on the Georgian identity to go beyond the stereotyping of the working classes. This was a major turn in Georgian

²¹⁶ Aleks Eror, « Is Post-Soviet Fashion Ethically Problematic? » *Highsnobiety*, Opinion 1 February 2017
<https://www.highsnobiety.com/2017/02/01/post-soviet-fashion-trend/>

²¹⁷ “Gosha Rubchinskiy to Stop Label, Launch New Venture” *Business of Fashion*, 4th April 2018
<https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/news-analysis/gosha-rubchinskiy-to-stop-label-launch-new-venture>

fashion which creates a lot of emotions in Georgia, where the designer is still seen as a local hero despite his controversial style.

Indeed, this collection was the first to fully narrate Georgian history through fashion. In an interview for *Dazed and Confused* magazine²¹⁸, the designer stated the following:

“I went back to my past in Georgia to face my fears and painful moments that I never went back to, like post-war in the 90s, and I really made the most personal fashion proposition out of that.”

The runway displayed t-shirts with the name “Georgia” in Georgian alphabet, one printed in the LGBT rainbow colour²¹⁹, jackets with the Georgian flag²²⁰, military outfits remembering the civil war, and all-black and leather masks²²¹ referring to the gangs but also, according to him, to the mask he was once wearing to dissimulate his true Georgian identity as a designer. None of his previous collections talked about Georgian history so clearly. The designer even created an app, scanning the VR codes on the clothes, which takes the user to a Wikipedia page on the Georgian genocide in 1992 in Abkhazia, the separatist region from where the designer hails. Demna Gvasalia is not the only designer who used Georgian cultural elements in his collection, but he is certainly the most well-known in Western Europe.

The nineties inspiration is still at the core of the creative process, but now, it does not display the fashion of this time only; it narrates the historical events that have led to this fashion, being the civil war, the penury and the constant insecurity. In other words, it recontextualizes the so-called “post-Soviet” style. It responds to one of the critiques expressed about the success of this trend abroad, i.e. that Westerners are dressing up like Georgian working-classes without being aware of the history and the social background behind this style. As for the commodification of Georgian counterculture, the clear reference to the *Bassiani*’s protest held last May also brings

²¹⁸ Emma Hope Allwood, “Vetements’ latest show was about Demna Gvasalia’s war-torn childhood” *Dazed and Confused*, 1 July 2018 <http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/40548/1/vetements-ss19-demna-gvasalia-paris-pfw-couture-georgia>

²¹⁹ See fig 4.14

²²⁰ See fig 4.15

²²¹ See fig 4.16

attention to the fights of Georgian underground culture. It reintegrates their political demands, previously ignored by most of the western buyers of this specific look.

Overall, it seems that the “post-Soviet” aesthetic helped, first, to put Georgia on the map by playing with exotic clichés, which please a foreign audience, and once the attention was here, it reintegrate the historical specifics that have constructed the narrative identity of Georgia as a nation. In the history of fashion, no designer has created an app that links so closely history and fashion²²². It shows how important this medium is for Georgia to project its own national narrative abroad, because fashion is ultimately a tool for cultural diplomacy.

I discussed this last point with the founder of the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, Sofia Tchkonია²²³. She told me that she has always aimed to restore the Georgian reputation abroad but found out that politics would not be the best way. However, fashion, and especially high fashion, is an appealing industry, to which people can relate, more than to some political projects. “Once you have a fashion week, people know it is safe to travel here”, she said. Fashion, as a visual expression of the national *savoir-faire*, can overcome translation issues from Georgian designers to their international audience, and vice versa. Plus, to refer to the elite theory of fashion, if the western elite starts thinking positively about Georgia, it will later be diffused at a larger scale through the imitation process. Ultimately, it brings a new form of tourism to Georgia.

The Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week actually works closely with the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Tourism. The ministries are supporting the organisation financially, notably in paying for the transport and accommodation of international guests.²²⁴ The Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia has also created a governmental program called “Enterprise Georgia” supporting the development of new Georgian brands abroad, by financing their showrooms for instance. According to their website, their Export Department: “Provide coordination, organization and co-financing of B2B exhibitions, helping Georgia-based companies, make new business connections, identify potential partners, diversify production and

²²² Emma Elizabeth Davidson, “Vetements has created an app to teach you the history of Georgia” *Dazed and Confused*, 1 July 2018

²²³ Sofia Tchkonია, Creative Director of the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week interviewed in March 2018 in Tbilisi

²²⁴ Salomé Mikshavidze, former PR Manager of *Matériel* interviewed in March 2018 in Tbilisi

penetrate new export markets.”²²⁵ Therefore, there is no interference in the creative process, unlike in the Soviet time; the government only helps to promote Georgian brands to a foreign audience, contributing to the potential of this industry.

This shows that fashion is considered as a powerful “business card”, which can help the economic, touristic and cultural development of the country. As such, Georgian fashion became part of the overall public and cultural diplomacy of Georgia abroad. Each year, the fashion week attracts more attention from specialized magazines which all underline that Georgian fashion is more than Demna Gvasalia, and that the new generation of Georgian designers, supported by the government, made Tbilisi a new capital of fashion.²²⁶²²⁷²²⁸²²⁹²³⁰²³¹²³²²³³

²²⁵ Enterprise Georgia – About us: <http://www.enterprisegeorgia.gov.ge/en/about>

NB: This list of articles published in specialized magazines below is non-exhaustive

²²⁶ Barry Samaha, “How These Emerging Designers Art Putting Tbilisi, Georgia, on the Fashion Map” *Forbes*, 11 May 2018 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/barrysamaha/2018/05/11/mercedes-benz-fashion-week-tbilisi-2018/#44251c646680>

²²⁷ Will Coldwell, “Art, beats and fashion: an inside view of Tbilisi’s creative boom” *The Guardian*, 11 April 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/may/14/georgian-techno-fans-extremists-clash-tbilisi-fight-club-culture>

²²⁸ Elsa De Berker, “How Georgia became the World’s Most Exciting Fashion Destination” *Fashionista*, 29 November 2017 <https://fashionista.com/2017/11/georgia-tbilisi-tourism-fashion>

²²⁹ Dena Silver, “Georgia Just Might Be the Fashion Capital of Eastern Europe” *Observer*, 12 May 2016 <https://observer.com/2016/12/georgia-just-might-be-the-fashion-capital-of-eastern-europe/>

²³⁰ “Georgia is the new Black (Sea Fashion Hub)” *The Economist* 3rd May 2018 <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/05/03/georgia-is-the-new-black-sea-fashion-hub>

²³¹ Anastasiia Fedorova, “Eastern fashion is moving in the Right Direction.” *Wallpaper*, 3rd May 2018 <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/8676/adidas-brand-russia-rubchinskiy>

²³² Sophia Abriat, “La Mode Géorgienne impose son Style.” *i-D Magazine*, 14th May 2018 <https://i-d.vice.com/fr/article/evk494/la-mode-georgienne-impose-son-style-la-preuve-par-4>

²³³ Ashley W. Simpson, “6 Breakout Tbilisi Fashion Week Designers to Watch” *Fashionista*, 14 May 2018 <https://fashionista.com/2018/05/tbilisi-fashion-week-2018-new-designers>

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the link between social representations and the emergence of specific trends in Georgia, from the Soviet era to now. It implied to uncover the relation of fashion to identity at the individual and collective level. For this purpose, I relied on the semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes, who demonstrated that trends are a language that can only be understood in the context in which it appears and develops. This implied to reintegrate the cultural and moral complexity of the Georgian society, made accessible by field researches.

It showed that Georgia has still an unresolved relation to its past but that some Georgian designers came with a creative way to reclaim it. The debate on the authenticity of the “post-Soviet” aesthetics shows the competing narratives within Georgia, reflected in the variety of styles proposed by different designers who do not have the same logic of appropriation and projection of the visual national identity. Still, the emergence a “post-Soviet” aesthetic constitutes a major rupture with the way Georgian fashion reflects social realities since the Soviet Union.

The chapter two showed that Soviet fashion was representative of the authorized culture only, infused with the regime’s ideology. Moreover, Soviet fashion magazines displayed a type of fashion that was only accessible to a narrow economic elite, despite the inclusive photoshoots, aiming for representativity. It also demonstrated how the non-compliance of some groups with the authorized fashion was seen as a deviance, or even a threat to the public order. In the context of the Cold War, fashion was thus of greater political importance in the Eastern bloc. The case of the Blue Jeans Generation illustrates how alternative fashion progressively became a clear political statement. It shows an increase of the degree of politicization of youth culture since the *Stilyagi* movement. The failed hijacking of a plane departing from Georgia by seven young Georgians, known for wearing blues jeans and their execution by the Soviet regime in 1983 prove this point. I argue that in Georgia, this event has contributed to the perception of self-expression through fashion as a protest against an oppressive system and a demand for freedom. The analysis showed that this aspect is still relevant nowadays.

The third chapter investigated how fashion in the nineties was representative of the chaos of the time. Progressively, Western brands have penetrated the Georgian market, continuing the influence of foreign trends in the visual identity of Georgia. As the nineties became a time of myths and a key aspect of the construction of the Georgian narrative identity, this chapter investigated more deeply the cognitive mechanisms at play when reflecting on this troubling period. It found that this period has increased the traumatic identity inherited from the Soviet time, in a country that was once the best touristic destination in the Soviet Union.

In the first half of the 2010s, in an attempt to change the narrative identity of Georgia abroad, the fashion industry started producing trends that were really much alike Western ones. At the social level, this was to answer to the requests of a new economic elite, also known as *Beaumonde*, anglophone and western-oriented. The development of the industry was top-down, from this minority to the masses. The democratization of brands and the rising popularity of Georgian designers at home relied partly on a narrative identity promoting the local anchorage of their brands, in line with the revival of patriotism after the Rose Revolution in 2004. But this type of national identity projected abroad through fashion was actually incomplete, as the majority of the society was missing from the narrative.

This is why the “post-Soviet” aesthetic is a major turn in the fashion history of Georgia and in its relations with foreign countries. At the international level, this is the first time that trends coming from the former Soviet bloc become an inspiration for Western brands, and not the other way around. Displaying an apparent sincere visual identity of Georgia, inspired from its troubling history has been proved a winning strategy as Tbilisi became a new capital for fashion and underground culture. Indeed, this aesthetic is fostered by designers who have a close connection to the active and politicized youth subcultures, which was historically excluded from mainstream fashion. At the social level, taking low fashion at the highest level of fashion reverses the lasting logic of the top-down diffusion of trends. Overall, fashion is becoming more representative of the society compare to the previous decades in that it is more socially inclusive. The risk of this mainstreaming process and of the re-appropriation of this style by foreigners is the neutralization of the initial meaning of this fashion trends and the perpetuation of stereotypes on the Georgian society and its history.

The fading on this trend shows that Georgian fashion is now moving forward to the next step. The support of the government shows that fashion is considered as a tool of public diplomacy, which could restore the reputation of Georgia, lost during the Soviet Union and the nineties, as an attractive country with a vibrant cultural scene.

“On my honour as a student of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.”

Lorraine Vaney

Portfolio

This selection of pictures is a visual illustration of the arguments made throughout this thesis.

Chapter Two: Soviet Fashion

1. *The Stilyagi: the infamous first alternative fashion of the Soviet Union.*

The Stilyagi were not only understood as criminals, because of their connection to the black market, but also as traitors to Soviet public morality and as potential Western spies, brainwashed by Western culture. They were mocked for their eccentricity and became representative of the deviations of Western fashion and bad taste.

The Stilyaga Santa Claus and the traditional Santa in 1964. "Are you also a Santa? –Yes, I am serving the stylish companies".



FIGURE 1.1. Source: Olga Vainshtein, "Orange Jackets and Pea Green Pants: The Fashion of Stilyagi in Soviet Postwar Culture." *Fashion Theory* Vol. 22, No. 2 (2018) Picture: *Krokodil* 1949

Kukriniki. "Poisonous mushrooms". Krokodil, 1959. The caption: "Are they foreigners? No, they are our local poisonous mushrooms from eyebrows to toes. They are our home-grown 'Broadway'".



FIGURE 1.2

Source: Olga Vainshtein, "Orange Jackets and Pea Green Pants: The Fashion of Stilyagi in Soviet Postwar Culture." *Fashion Theory* 22, no. 2 (2018) Picture: *Krokodil* 1959



FIGURE 1.3: Closing scene of the movie *Stilyagi*, showing the two main characters surrounded by modern youth subcultures. Sources: Vadim Goryainov *Stilyagi* Directed by Valery Todorovsky (Moscow: 2008)

2. Case Study: Soviet fashion magazine

What does the comparison between Western and Soviet fashion magazines tell about the rhetoric of fashion in both blocs?

Western fashion of the late eighties, as displayed in Western fashion magazines, or “glossies” was characterized by glamorous photoshoots, centred on the model who represented the ultimate -and unreachable- beauty ideal of the period. This moment of the history of fashion remains famous for its “Supermodels.”

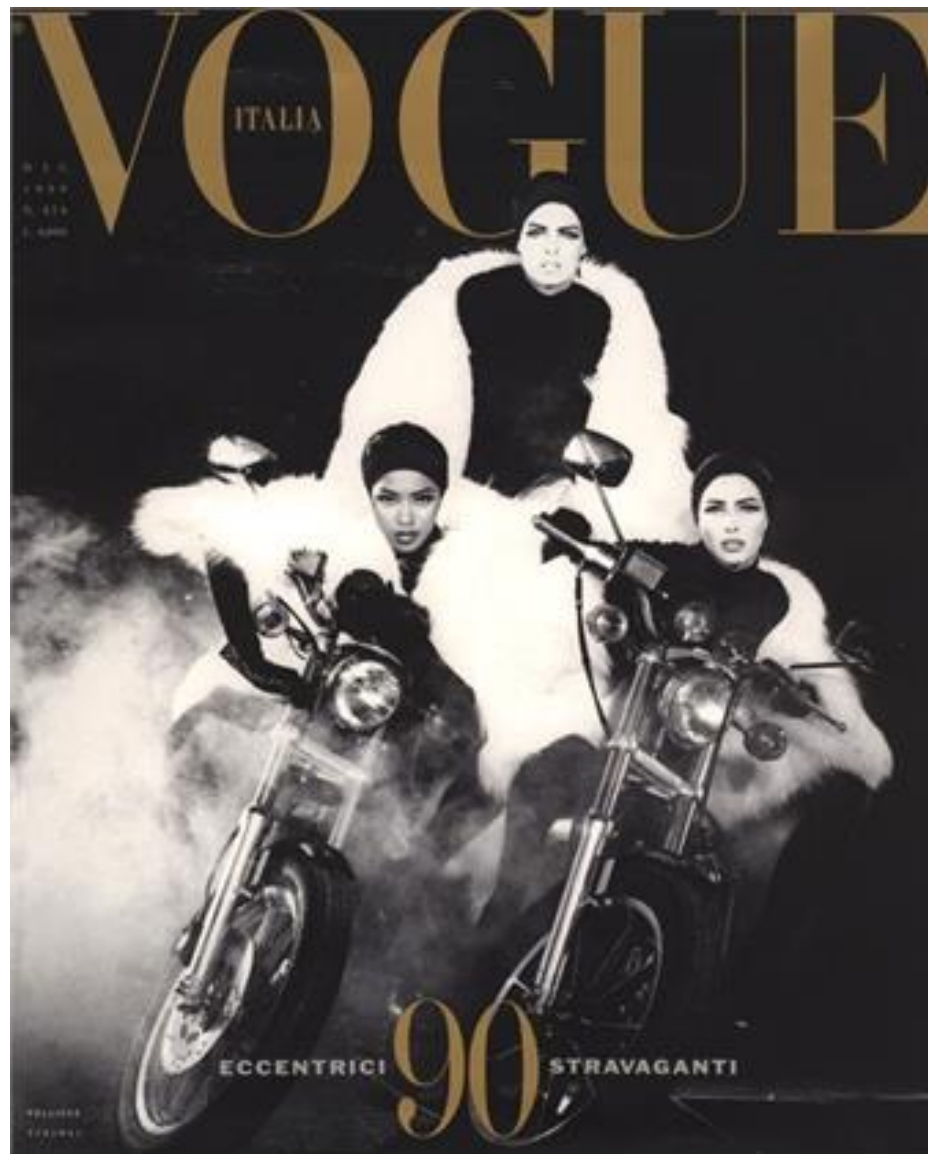


FIGURE 2.1. The “Supermodels” Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista and Christy Turlington photographed by Steven Meisel for Vogue Italia, December 1989

Source: Vogue Italia – Encyclo.

Available from: <http://www.vogue.it/en/news/encyclo//photography/m/steven-meisel>

In the late eighties, western fashion magazines started merging pop culture and fashion, thus putting a greater emphasis on the individuality and life-style of the select few, which led to a sharp increase in sales. This major turn in the fashion industry came after Anna Wintour became editor-in-chief of US Vogue in 1988; she chose the world-famous pop singer Madonna for the US edition of the magazine in May 1989.

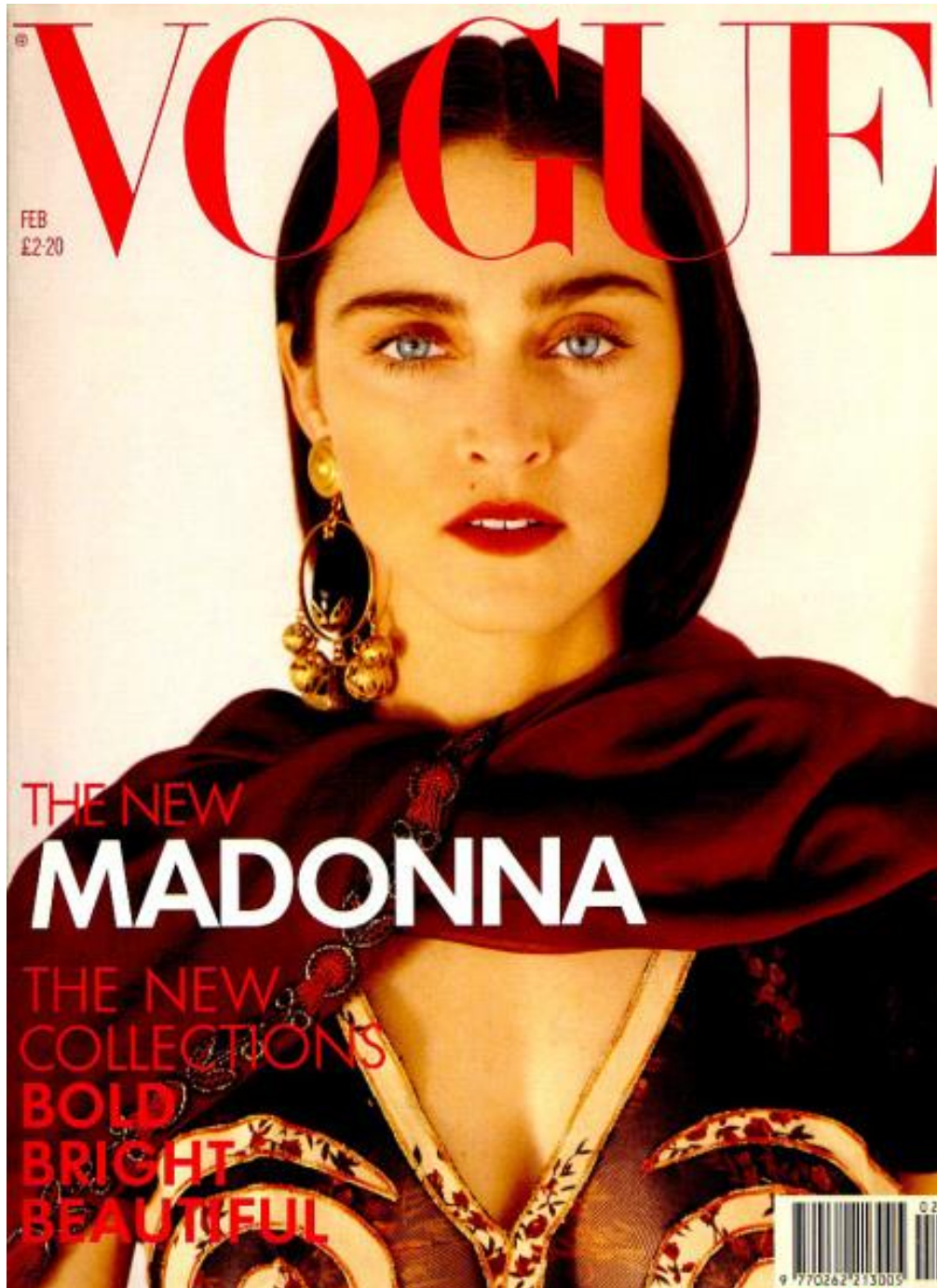


FIGURE 2.2. Madonna, photographed by Herb Ritts for *Vogue* UK, February 1989.
Source: Vogueography “Madonna Throughout the Years in Vogue” 3 January 2016
Available from: <https://vogueography.wordpress.com/2016/01/03/madonna-throughout-the-years-in-vogue/>

All magazines are now the property of *Matériel* and are available at the *Dots's* shop in central Tbilisi.

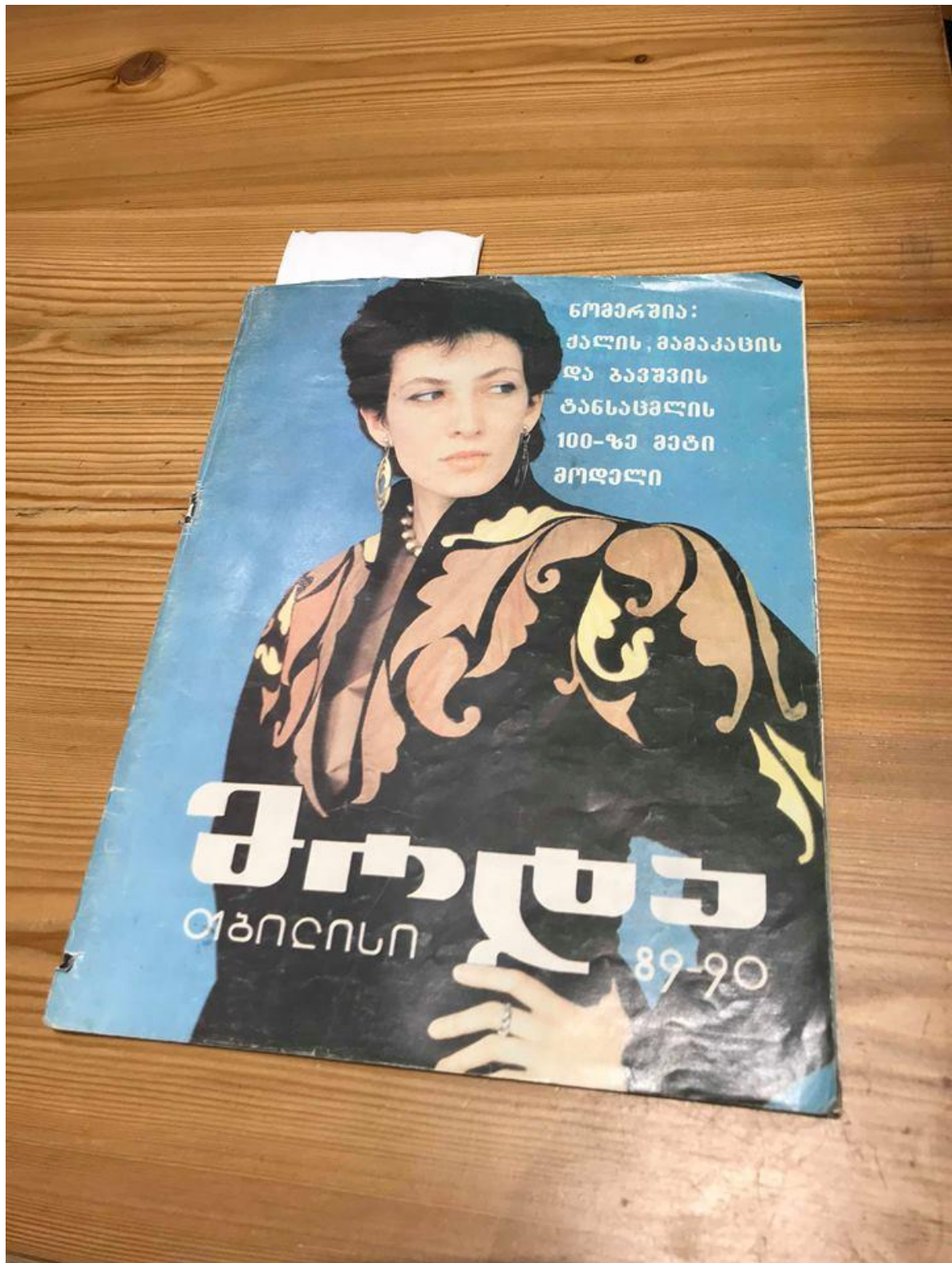


FIGURE 2.3 Cover of *Fashion*, published in Georgia, 1989-1990.

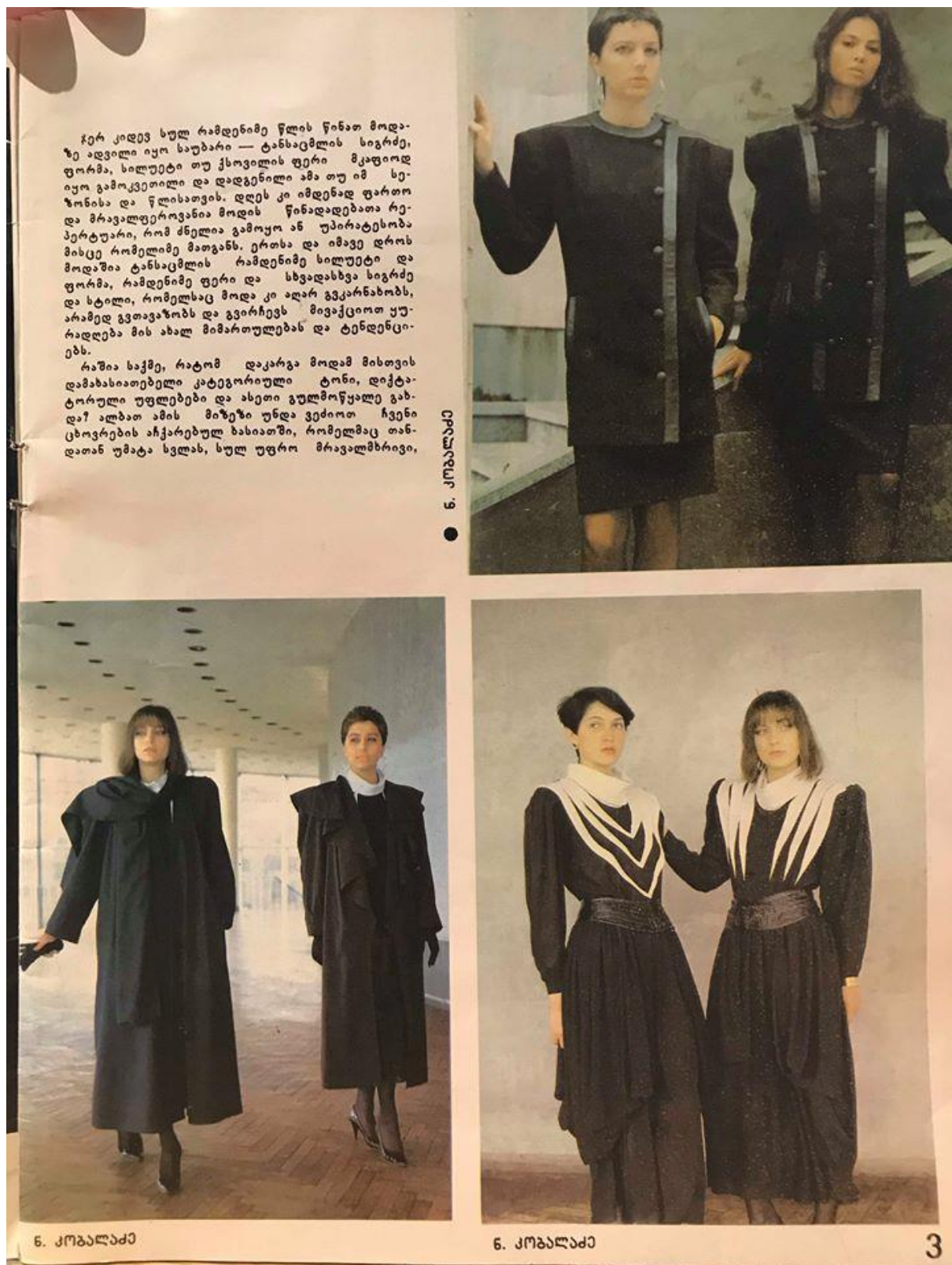


FIGURE 2.4: Many Soviet photoshoots are taken outside, in random location, with no special external element and original storytelling added to the photos. The focus is on the clothes, rather than on the models.

Source: *Fashion Georgia* 1989-1990 pp3



FIGURE 2.5: Soviet models are pictured in a sober and natural way, unlike Western models who are often sexualized in Western fashion magazines (see next page for comparison)
Source: *Fashion Georgia* 1989-1990 pp23



FIGURE 2.6: Naomi Campbell and Linda Evangelista photographed by Steven Meisel for Vogue Italia, December 1989
Source: Vogue Italia – Encyclo.
Available from: <http://www.vogue.it/en/news/encyclo//photography/m/steven-meisel>



FIGURE 2.7: Soviet magazines casted a greater diversity of models, from various sizes and age groups.
Source: *Fashion Georgia 1989-1990* pp29

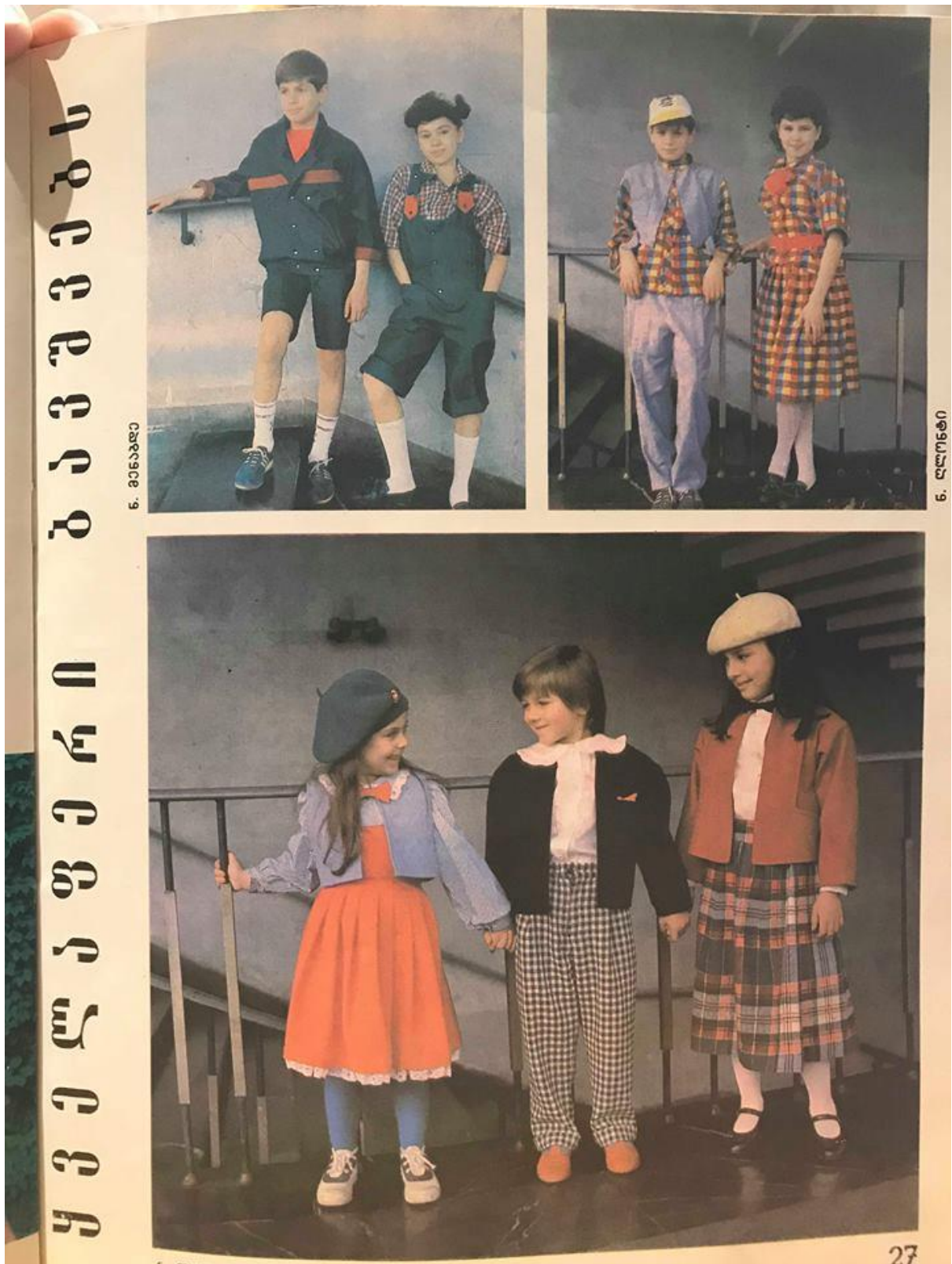


FIGURE 2.8: Kid's fashion
Source: *Fashion Georgia 1989-1990* pp27

3. *The Blue Jeans Generation*

Portraits of the perpetrators of the failed hijacking of the flight 6833, in November 1983. The would-be hijackers were later executed by the regime. They were actors, musicians, painters, and physicians, mastering foreign languages and becoming famous for wearing jeans, a visual expression of their pro-west attitude and tastes.

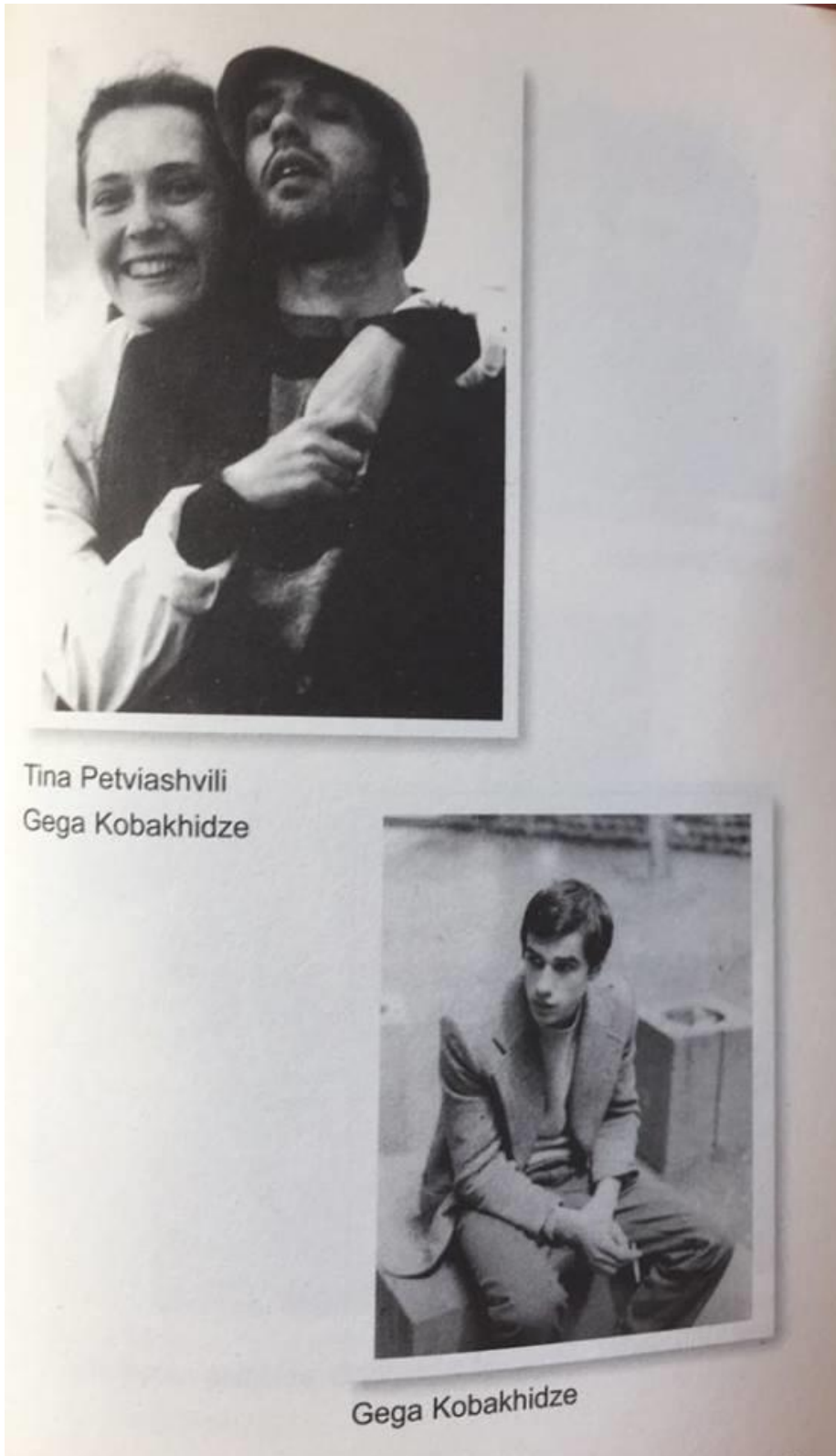


Kakha Iverieli, Paata Iverieli

Gega Kobakhidze, Irakli Charkviani, Giorgi Mirzashvili

FIGURE 3.1

Source: Dato Turashvili *Flight From the USSR* 2nd ed. (Tbilisi: Babursulakauri Publishing, 2008) pp176



Tina Petviashvili
Gega Kobakhidze

Gega Kobakhidze

FIGURE 3.2

Source: Dato Turashvili *Flight From the USSR* 2nd ed. (Tbilisi: Babursulakauri Publishing, 2008) pp173

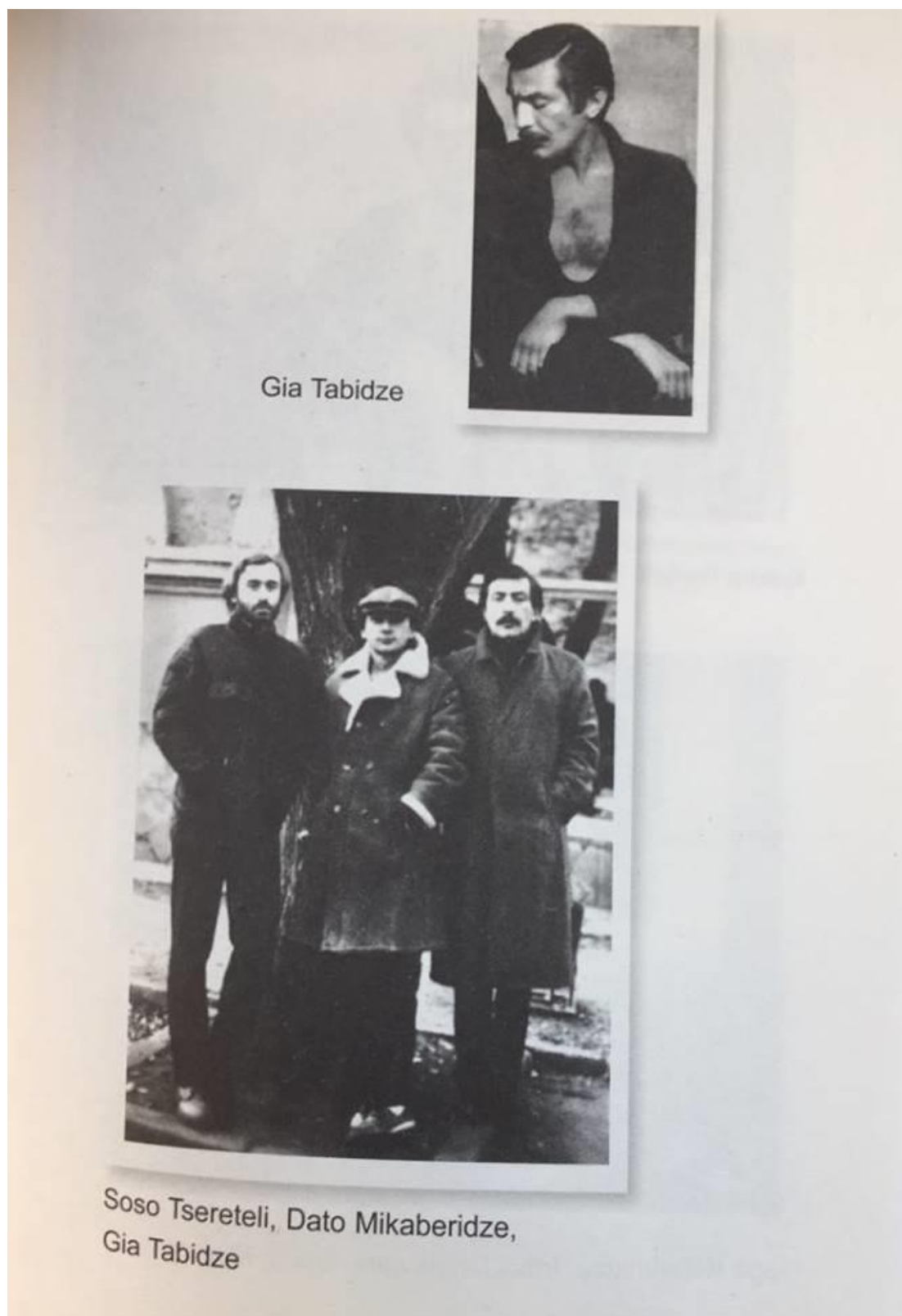


FIGURE 3.3

Source: Dato Turashvili *Flight From the USSR* 2nd ed. (Tbilisi: Babursulakauri Publishing, 2008) pp175

Chapter Four:

Georgian Fashion: questioning the “post-Soviet” label

1. *Tbilisi’s Bazaar*



FIGURE 4.1: Tamara Makhatadze shopping in the vintage area of the bazaar of Tbilisi
Source: Nini Mtchedlishvili’s personal photo. 06 September 2018



FIGURE 4.2: Georgian national flag in Tbilisi's Bazaar
Source: Eliott Bennaceur's personal photo. 23 Mars 2018

2. *Georgian fashion beyond post-sovietism*

I have selected only pictures of the collections of the designers mentioned in the thesis. The website of the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week references 60 designers today.

Anouki – by Anouki Areshidze

Anouki FW 18-19. Courtesy of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tbilisi



“ANOUKI is a Georgian, Tbilisi-based brand, established in July 2013, with head designer Anouki Areshidze. Anouki is 26 years old, Tbilisi-born designer.

ANOUKI presents ready-to-wear clothes, shoes and accessories. Brand’s main idea is to be “very own” for each customer, not to be cliché and understand what’s necessary for ladies in a specific moment. Whole team does its best to prove that it is possible to create something new and exciting in Georgia, where fashion industry is just in the process of development. We try to establish new standard on the local market, in every aspect of brand development.”

FIGURE 4.3

Available from:

<http://www.mbfashionweektbilisi.com/anouki>

Avtandil – by Avtandil Tskvitinidze

Avtandil FW 18-19. Courtesy of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tbilisi



“Avtandil`s first steps in fashion are linked with the Avant-garde festival in 1995, where the designer first presented his collection- a mixture of fine arts and contemporary fashion. The same year he graduated from Tbilisi State Academy of Arts. In 2000, The brand Avtandil was born, which was followed by first store and fashion house. Avtandil has been one of the most important people in local fashion scene ever since. Besides presenting his collections in his home country, he also participates in several fashion weeks across globe. Avtandil held personal shows in Paris, London, Rome and Montecarlo. Nowadays, Avtandil has two clothing lines- the luxe and more casual one. 3 stores in Tbilisi, one in Batumi, one in Yerevan and Showrooms all around the world is where the designers` newest works can be found.

FIGURE 4.4

Available from:

<http://www.mbfashionweektbilisi.com/avtandil>

Balenciaga – by Demna Gvasalia



Demna Gvasalia is born on the 25 of March 1981 in Sokhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, Georgia. He graduates from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. He first led the design team of Maison Martin Margiela and Louis Vuitton. He became the third creative director of Balenciaga in 2015 and created its own label Vetement the same year.

Balenciaga FW 16-17.

The “market bag” inspired from Tbilisi’s bazaar, by Balenciaga. Courtesy of The Real Real

FIGURE 4.5

Available from:

<https://realstyle.therealreal.com/balenciaga-bazar-vs-market-bag/>

Balenciaga FW 18 Look 49/74

Courtesy of Vogue Runway.

Available from:

<https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2018-ready-to-wear/balenciaga/slideshow/collection#49>



Figure 4.6

George Keburia

George Keburia FW 18-19. Courtesy of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week



“George Keburia is a self-taught designer, born in 1990 Tbilisi, Georgia. He founded his fun-loving eponymous label in 2010, presenting a surrealist collection saturated with fantastical references and outlandish concepts. For his debut collection, George Keburia was awarded the ‘Best Newcomer’ Award at Tbilisi Fashion Week. Two years later, Keburia achieved international recognition with his capsule collection "Bird Nest", winning the design contest Be Next 2012 in Tbilisi and the Community's Choice Muuse x Vogue Talents Vision Award. In 2013, George became a designer at Fashion House Materiel, creating apparel for the brand for two years. Currently, George Keburia focuses on his own label, making more wearable clothing with an emphasis on masculine tailoring and subtle feminine finishes.”

FIGURE 4.7

Available from:

<http://www.mbfashionweektbilisi.com/george-keburia>

ABOUT THE BRAND

“George Keburia is a successfully operating brand on the local, as well as global fashion market. The brand is represented in various boutiques and concept stores in Georgia, Russia, Ukraine and United States, as well as sold online and in pop-up stores across the world. Its unique design aesthetic represents a modern interpretation of masculinity and femininity by creating raw-provoking silhouettes through an intriguing compilation between menswear and womenswear elements. George Keburia is a brand that represents the new era in which fresh and eccentric lifestyle meets classy. The raw garments, shiny and sparkly textiles, star shaped and geometric accessories never stay unseen and find their followers.”

George Keburia A/W 16/17



FIGURE 4.8

About this collection, the designer stated the following:

“Some details from the current collection, especially gun prints, are influenced by the economic and political consequences of the Georgian civil wars in the 90s. The gun print was used to reflect the difficult and dark times the country went through, and the rainbow colours were used to undermine that darkness and make it more optimistic.”

Source: Anastasiia Fedorova “Meet Georgian’s Other Fashion Mastermind” *i-D Magazine* 24 May 2016 https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/nebgbm/meet-georgias-other-fashion-mastermind

Gola Damian

Gola Damian FW 2017. Courtesy of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week



FIGURE 4.9

Available from:

<http://www.mbfashionweektbilisi.com/gola-damian>

Matériel - by Lado Bokuchava

Matériel by Lado Bokuchava FW 18/19. Courtesy of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week



FIGURE 4.10

Available from:

<http://www.mbfashionweektbilisi.com/lado-bokuchava>

“Lado Bokuchava is a Georgian brand founded in 2017 by young Georgian designer Lado Bokuchava. He graduated from Tbilisi State Academy of art and since then has been working as a head designer for famous Georgian brands like Atelier Kikala and MATÉRIEL.

Lado’s collections are always feminine and sophisticated. Brands signature is 70’s underground style mixed with contemporary world. The sources of inspiration for designer are always different movies or books that are expressed in the mood of collection.

The brand’s first collection was SS 2017 which made a huge success not only in Georgia but outside country as well.”

Situationist by Irakli Rusadze

Situationist FW 18/19. Courtesy of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week

Nb: this fashion show was held in the underground techno club *Bassiani*



FIGURE 4.11

“Irakli Rusadze was born on 22 January 1991 in Tbilisi, Georgia. Self-taught designer started his career early, when he was 15. He studied construction and sewing during his short courses with Georgian old masters. Irakli’s first debut appearance was in 2010. He established his label when he was 17 in 2008. Irakli is based in Tbilisi, Georgia. Currently He is focusing on his label.”

Available from:

<http://www.mbfashionweektbilisi.com/situationist>

Situationist SS 17/18. Courtesy of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week

FIGURE 4.12



Available from:

<http://www.mbfashionweektbilisi.com/situationist>

Vetements - by Demna Gvasalia
Vetements FW 2015. Courtesy of Vogue Runway



FIGURE 4.13

Look 12/35. Available from: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2015-ready-to-wear/vetements/slideshow/collection#12>

Vetements FW 2018. Courtesy of Vogue Runway



FIGURE 4.14

Look 19/77. Available from: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2015-ready-to-wear/vetements/slideshow/collection#19>



FIGURE 4.15

Look 40/77. Available from: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2015-ready-to-wear/vetements/slideshow/collection#40>



FIGURE 4.16

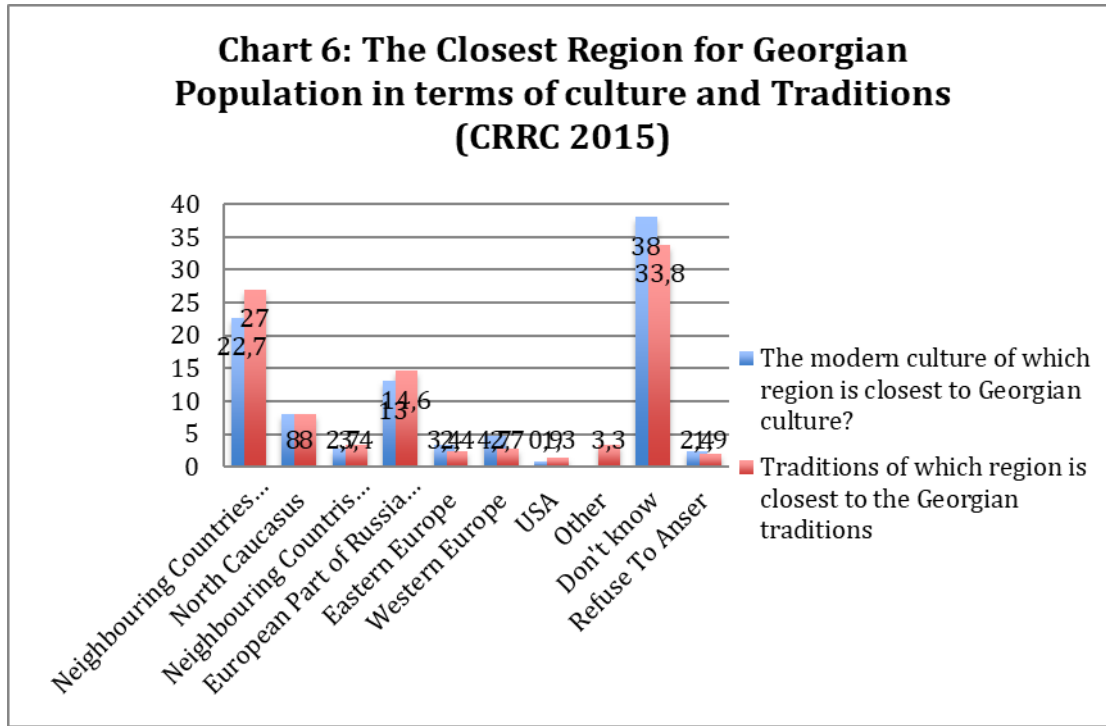
Look 54/77. Available from: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2015-ready-to-wear/vetements/slideshow/collection#54>



FIGURE 4.17

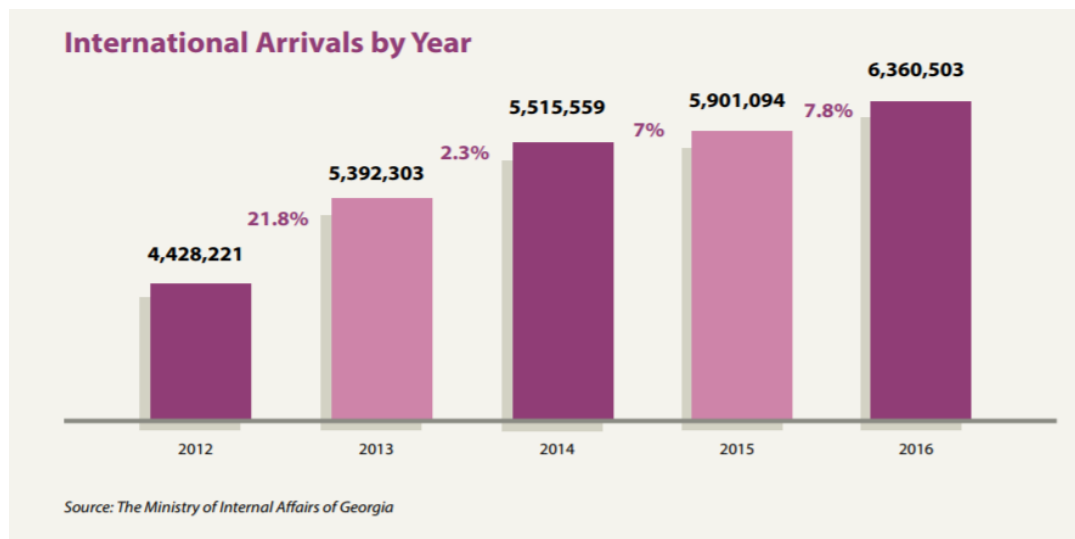
Look 65/77. Available from: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2015-ready-to-wear/vetements/slideshow/collection#65>

Appendix



Source: Source: CRRC Caucasus Barometer: 2015 in Kakachia, Kornely and Markarov, Aleksandr Aleksandrovič *Values and identity as sources of foreign policy in Armenia and Georgia* (Tbilisi: Publishing House "UNIVERSAL", 2016).

Growth of Georgian Tourism 2012-2016



Source: Georgian Ministry of Tourism Georgian Tourism in Figures: Structure and Industry Data (2016)

International Arrivals by Country

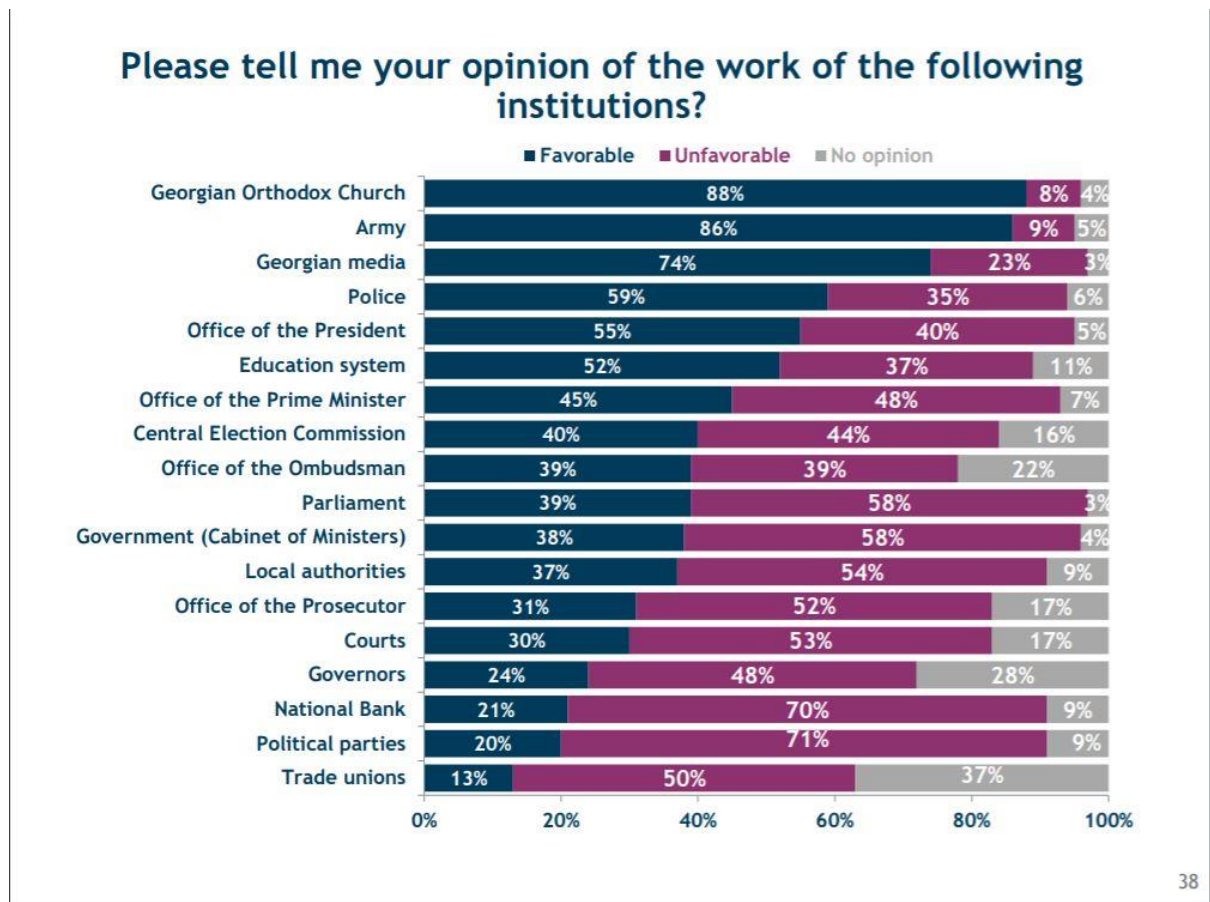
International Arrivals: Top 10 Countries

Country	2015	2016	Change	% Change
Azerbaijan	1,393,257	1,523,703	130,446	9.4%
Armenia	1,468,888	1,496,437	27,549	1.9%
Turkey	1,391,721	1,256,561	-135,160	-9.7%
Russia	926,144	1,038,750	112,606	12.2%
Ukraine	141,734	174,858	33,124	23.4%
Iran	25,273	147,937	122,664	485.4%
Israel	59,487	92,215	32,728	55%
Kazakhstan	36,777	48,849	12,072	32.8%
Poland	41,425	44,436	3,011	7.3%
Germany	36,826	40,915	4,089	11.1%

Source: The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia

Source: Georgian Ministry of Tourism Georgian Tourism in Figures: Structure and Industry Data (2016)

Public Opinion Poll in 2017:



Sources: “Survey of Public Opinion in Georgia” by the Center for Insights in Survey Research (2017)

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- Lado Bokuchava for Matériel
- Tiko Paksa for Matériel
- Ria Keburia

2. *Brand Managers and Public Relations Managers*

- Salomé Mikashavidze for Matériel
- Beka Gvishiani for Anouki
- Zurab Mgaloblishvil for Avtandil

3. *Tbilisi Fashion Week*

- Anano Dolaberidze International Media Relations & Fashion Editor for Nargis Magazine

4. *Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week*

- Sofia Tchkonია Creative Director of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tbilisi

II. Unstructured interviews

This method was combined with field researches, only the names mentioned in this research are appearing in this section of the primary sources -but many others were interviewed between January and July 2018.

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