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Resonant Heels and 'The Devil Wears Prada': Building and Sharing Identity Through Sound

Original Study

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Abstract: This paper explores how the "sounding silhouette" (Stasiulite) – the sound produced by a dressed body – becomes a social value, that is, a semantic concept (Violi). It proposes a methodology for analysing the valences emerging from sounding and the values emerging from signalling silhouettes (community values), drawing on Peirce, Greimas, and Landowski. Through Ricoeur's notion of identity, the sounding silhouette is shown to shape identity via four *personae* types: coherent (acceptance), indifferent (*a priori* rejection), rebel (*a posteriori* rejection), and aesthetic/ascetic (neutrality). This four types of *personae* developing from the relation with the values sent: accepted, rejected *a priori* or *a posteriori* or neutralized. These theories are applied to *The Devil Wears Prada*, where heels function as a signalling silhouette linked to power and willingness. This silhouette acts as interpellation, initiating dialogue with others. Using Marino and Santangelo's framework on spreadability, the paper argues that in Western societies, the dominant shared values are power and willingness, tied to the construction of self-made identities.

Keywords: semiotics of dress, *The Devil Wears Prada*, sonic fashion, semiotics of fashion, identity, spreadability

MATERIALITY AND RESONANCE: THE HEELS

"Can sounds create a typology of identity?" Yes, they can, as already Schafer (1992, 37) seems to suggest[1], specifically in the processes of identification. But what happens with clothes? Do they produce sounds?

The sound of heels pushes us to reflect upon the values intertwined with the resonance concept, in its double material and abstract face, i.e. in an *embodied* perspective.

While clothing is rarely considered sonically, certain items, like high heels, possess distinctive acoustic properties, making them potent "sounding silhouettes" (Stasiulytė 2018)[2]. But since there is a clear alliance between human body and heels in the act of walking, they create a new body – a new sonic silhouette – that produces a new *sounding silhouette* that is given by the interaction of the enclothed-heeled-body – i.e. the human-body-with-heels – and the material(s) upon which the heels are moved. It is of the utmost importance to notice that the sound of heels arises from three key properties:

- timbre: the unique quality of the sound, primarily determined by the interaction of non-human elements (heel material, floor surface, weight);

1 "Can you identify friends simply by the tempo of their walking?" (Schafer 1992, 37).
2 The latter being "an active form of sonic silhouette that occurs when sound is emitted" (Stasiulytė 2018, 138) while a sonic silhouette being a "passive form of the [body and cloths] combination" (*idem*., 319). Even if we are drawn to think that it is more appropriate to talk about sonic silhouette as "emersion" (the passage from virtual to actual [Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998, 137–138; Paolucci 2024]) and *sounding silhouette* as "manifestation" (the passage from actual to real [Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998, 137–138; Paolucci 2024]) and not as passive or active forms.

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- frequency or rhythm: the pacing of the sound, primarily governed by the human element (the walker's gait and speed);
- intensity or volume: the loudness, resulting from an equal interaction between the human (force of step) and non-human (materials), therefore manifesting (Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998; Paolucci 2024)[3] the sounding silhouette.

In fact, the connections of humans and non-humans builds the collectives (Latour 2021). We said "primarily" since it is impossible to reduce the interaction between actors to only humans or non-humans: societies are built on this indissoluble chain. At the same time, it is possible to see that in some contexts exist more interactions between non-human-non-human or human-human, respectively in timbre and in frequency. If action occurs the inter-action between the two are mandatory: there is *enactment* (Varela et al. 2016; Malafouris 2013) emerging from the ongoing relation with the environment. In fact *resonance* (Rosa, 2019) is an ongoing process between the subject and the world, this relationship modifies and creates new subjects and worlds: "resonance is not an emotional state, but a mode of relation" (*idem.*, 234).

Following Peirce, once the sound is produced it triggers an *emotional* (the pathemic states), an *energetic* (e.g., turning one's head where the heel's sound was emitted as a *muscular interpretant* and/or focusing on this sound as *non-muscular interpretant*) and, at the end, a *logical interpretant* (inferring meaning based on habit, using Peirce's language, or a *script*[4], if using Eco's [2010]) (CP 5.476-91). The energetic interpretant as *pointing at something,* namely pushing attention, can be seen as the basis on how resonance as signification works in heels[5]. For instance, hearing heels might typically invoke the image of a woman (a cultural *habit*) that wants to highlight her presence; or of a man that wants to modulate the gender's norms (a minority but also a cultural *habit*), as Schafer's exercises suggest when linking sounds with identity. This demonstrates sound's tangible impact on social perception.

In semiotics of dress we define resonance as the *process by which materially produced sound generates and conveys meaning, leading to specific social valuations*. In fact, since our aim is to understand the social sanction about the *sounding silhouette*, we should ask ourselves what the social conception of resonance is. Once this has been clarified we can proceed by looking at it with theoretical instruments, such as the concept of *resonance* proposed by Rosa (2019), the inter-subjective and inter-objective regimes proposed by Landowski (2010), the social effects highlighted by the spreadability theory (Jenkins et al. 2013; Marino 2015; Santangelo 2016) and the construction of different identities (Ricoeur 1990).

Resonance valences and values: reception, isolation, interpellation and neutrality

But how can we understand the main social conception about resonance? As it is suggested by Violi (1997), to analyse the *semantic competence*, i.e. "insieme di interpretazioni convenzionalmente associate a determinate forme linguistiche" (*idem.*, 243)[6], it is a good practice to look at the dictionary (*idem.*, 251–252)[7].

The Dictionary defines resonance as "a quality of being resonant" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, n.d., "resonance"). This places "resonance" within the concept of state (Greimas 1970; 1983), aligning with Peircean firstness, not with action. The second, more specific definition emphasizes the relational aspect: "the sound or other vibration produced in an object by sound or vibration of a similar frequency from another object" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, n.d., "resonance"), highlighting its indexical quality – secondness. Its metaphorical meaning – reliant on norms, thus thirdness – emerges in the third definition: "the power to bring images, feelings, etc. into the mind of the person reading or listening" (*ibid.*). Following Peirce's distinction between "firstness, or spontaneity; secondness, or dependence; thirdness, or mediation" (CP 3.422), we stress the indexical aspect – secondness – of resonance.

This is also the method adopted by Rosa (2019), who defines resonance by starting with its physical basis: "Resonance is not an echo, but a responsive relationship, requiring that both sides speak with their own voice." (*idem.*, 241). This implies a firstness – a quality already inherent in the resonant bodies.

If we approach resonance as reception, secondness clarifies it further. Resonance as quality – in Rosa's terms, the synchronic and alienation properties of societal spheres – is linked to the predicative terms of a proposition. The indexicality of material resonance allows us to accept or reject its predication, its quality. Something resonates only if we relate to it – a relation that is active and meaningful, not what Rosa calls a "relation of relationlessness […] hav[ing] relationships […] yet deems them meaningless" (2019, 246), i.e., alienation. Here, focusing on material resonance, we note it occurs when a material body can tune with – i.e., receive, accept, and amplify – sounds. When sound is muted (rejected or absorbed), isolation results. This implies that in every *sounding silhouette,* whenever an action is performed, there is an act of *giving* between materials: every action produces sounds.

As Peirce (CP 3.464) emphasized, "giving" is a verb that always requires secondness because there is a correlation between subject and object. At resonance's onset, two possibilities arise: reception or isolation. However, Peirce also notes that "giving" requires three "actants"

3 I.e. the realization of the sonic silhouette of the dressed body.
4 It is a frame of interpretation about a practice.
5 This is also unanimous with Rosa's (2019) position according to which the resonance concept is a "mode of relation".
6 "[S]ets of interpretations conventionally associated to specific linguistic forms" (Violi 1997, 243, translated by the author).
7 We decided to consult the Oxford Learner's Dictionary since it summarizes the main uses of the lemma in a specific community of English speakers.

(Tesnière 2015 [1959]; Paolucci 2010): the giver, the given thing, and the receiver. In resonance, there is contemplation of the "given" or, more precisely, the "sent" thing. This "sent thing" is emphasized by the act of sound propagation[8]. Reception is, in fact, the *common ground for* every single *body*, but not each and every body reacts positively to the vibrations, i.e. resonates. However, in this paper we are going to talk about reception as a *positive reception*, as *tuning* between bodies, as *resonance*.

Heels indeed represent an exception to the simple opposition (reception vs. isolation), highlighting that at least two other values[9] emerge from the contradiction between these two. Heels do not properly possess the reception value – which in the human body is tied to the ears and the *soma* as material components and to the "sharing" of ideas as signification. Nor are they linked with isolation value: the sounds produced by heels, conversely, extend the wearer beyond the body. They are an *amplification* and an *affirmation* of a specificity, a *request* of tuning.

Therefore, sounding heels, by expanding a person's presence in space, negate isolation: they create a value of non-isolation. We might call this non-isolation "attention", relating it to psychological concepts that follow the perceptual moment that prompts focus. However, attention remains too tied to an ocular-centric perspective. To better link it with soundscape we propose to call it *interpellation*[10]. Thus, interpellation constitutes another value that could give rise to resonance.

What then negates reception? Perhaps "indifference": when one listens but rejects (i.e., transitions to mere hearing). The Oxford Dictionary defines indifference as "absence of feeling for or against […] esp. absence of care" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d., "indifference"). But indifference is still close to repulsion. Non-reception implies a lack of acceptance, distinct from rejection. It's hearing without listening. Indifference might be better described as neutrality: "Indetermination of the will (cf. indifferency n. I.3), or of a body to rest or motion; neutrality" (Oxford Dictionary cf. indifferency n. I.3). Neutrality combines elements of isolation and negated reception. Rosa's alienation – "a mode of relating to the world in which the subject encounters […] the world as either indifferent or repulsive" (2019, 246) – confuses these poles. Repulsion entails a negative sanction; indifference, an absent one. In our view, *non-reception* doesn't mute (as in isolation) but *weakens* or disperses sounds. *Muteness* occurs only in *isolation*.

But what is the distinction between valences and values? Valences are linked to phenomenological intensities – pre-semantic *continuum*. Values are the semantized, collectively codified aspects of those valences. Valences are vague, experiential gradients not necessarily verbalized[11]; values are verbalized, socially stabilized conventions (where language appears less arbitrary).

Material resonance continues only when emitted sounds tune with one another. This enables the interpretant chain to move toward a logical one – which becomes a symbol, a community convention. This is the transition from valences to values. The sounding silhouettes chosen for social resonance reveal the semiosphere (Lotman, Uspenskij 1975) – the culture's meaning-making space. Not all physically resonant materials are selected for social resonance. For instance, heels in *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel 2006) may not resonate materially, but they become socially resonant. According to radical enactivism (Malafouris 2013), objects co-construct meaning with subjects and environments. We will return to this phenomenological/social tension.

The key, here, to avoid methodological and epistemological misinterpretation is:

1. To focus on the material effects produced, i.e. the valences[12].
2. To find and analyse which are the resonance social phenomena[13].
3. To ask why these *material effects* are *spreading* inside a semiosphere: which values do they convey for that community? Namely, which are the values that are linked to those sounds in the products shared between the community's members?

This framework guides our analysis of sounding heels. At the material level, heels act on interpellation, expanding bodily presence in space. Through the interpretant process, they traverse emotional, energetic, and logical values[14]. Other examples will clarify the remaining categories (reception, neutrality, and isolation).

However, before the examples, an important clarification: the modes of existence are not accessible, they are not reducible; in fact we can only make an inference about them starting from the actions they produce when

8 Namely, amplification and modulation that starts from a (positive) reception.
9 Values that are reductions of a *continuum*, of valences.
10 We are now detaching *interpellation* from a politically conveyed perspective such as the one of Althusser (1971). Nevertheless this perspective could be further explored and integrated but we are not going to develop it, since we prefer to use the semiotic and sociological instruments.
11 It must be said that they could be verbalized thanks to *ratio difficilis* (Eco 2016) or *metaphorical constructions*.
12 Therefore isolation (absorbed sounds), resonance (reception and amplification sounds), interpellation (dominating sounds) and neutrality (reduced sounds), even though these are semantic values associated with the physical states (the latter presenting more nuances being a *continuum*).
13 In other words, which are the sounds more shared in a community, the most spread, highlighted by movies, social network videos, pop songs and/or trends that emerge inside a semiosphere.
14 For instance, from arousal (emotional interpretant) towards attention (energetic) to gender attribution (logical), such as a man challenging gender norms.

interacting (being a *sounding silhouette*)[15]. The valorisation depends also on how the body moves (thus how the clothes themselves give the possibility of articulating the body).

From a methodological point of view "[l]a pertinenza […] può essere spiegata […] soltanto dal punto di vista da cui si considerano gli oggetti in questione" (Prieto 1976, 86)[16].

The examples that I propose are the following:

- As per reception: ears and headphones as reception of distant sounds (like when calling);
- As for neutrality: each item that does not resonate (like tracksuit or in items that are made of "absorbing" material, like wool).
- For isolation we propose the headphones again – and this is a case that should be further explored due to its dynamical position, to its quality of being a participative opposition between values – and PVC adherent shirt[17].

Modes of existence			**Valence considered as Value**
Fabric	Sounds produced / Effect (of the fabric) on sound	Piece of clothing – Application on human body	
Fleece	Void/Absorption	Pyjamas – all body	Isolation
Wool	Sponginess/Absorption	Sweater – chest, arms, stomach	Isolation
Fur	Shuffle/absorption	Coat – chest, arms, stomach, upper legs	Isolation
Viscose	Stringy/accommodation	Shirt – chest, arms, stomach	Neutrality (nearer to isolation)
Linen	Dryness/accommodation	Shirt – chest, arms, stomach	Neutrality
Cotton	Dryness / partial absorption and accommodation	T-shirt – chest, upper arms, stomach	Neutrality
Denim	Dryness / partial accommodation	Jeans – legs	Neutrality (nearer to interpellation)
Leather	Thick and abrupt / repulsion and absorption	Shoes – feet	Interpellation (nearer to neutrality)
		Adherent Skirt – upper legs and low stomach	Isolation
PVC	Crispness, glitching / repulsion	Pants – legs	Interpellation

15 For this reason, all data presented in the chart (Table 1) are taken from my personal wardrobe. This does not mean that all clothes with the fabrics listed in the chart below present the same value. It is important that in each occurrence – so in each analysis – the values related to the occurrences are questioned according to the performance displayed, however the valences are going to be positioned in the continuum of the gradual opposition obtained between sounds absorption and sounds tuning. This was already noticed about the sound paradoxes: "When a kernel of corn is dropped on the floor it makes a particular sound, but if a whole sack of corn is dumped on the floor it makes a sound that is not the sum of all the individual kernels of corn, but a totally different and seemingly unrelated sound." (Schafer 1992, 91).

16 "The pertinence […] can be explained […] only from the perspective from where we analyse the discussed objects" (Prieto 1976, 86, translated by the author).

17 Both, in fact, reject the sound of the outside making us "be only with ourselves". The sound does not reach our body because there is a barrier between the world and the *soma*: "resonant relationships are possible only in mutually accommodating resonant spaces" (Rosa 2019, 238). In the case of headphones, the "external world" is "internalized" through our own agency: by choosing

Acrylic nails	Clacking / expansion of the sound	Nails – hands	Interpellation
Chiffon	Stringy and crispy / repulsion and absorption	Saree – all body	Interpellation (nearer to isolation)
Glass	Clacking / expansion of the sound	Jewellery – ears, neck, wrist, fingers, ankle	Interpellation (nearer to reception)
Metallic fabric	Clinking / repulsion and expansion of the sound	Shirt – chest, stomach	Reception (nearer to interpellation)

Table 1. This table is a draft of classification, following and rethinking to our specific case some exercises (n. 9, 12, 20, 29, 74) proposed by Schafer (1992).

In building meaning(s) clothes have one of their axes in the "complex dialectic, sometimes paradoxical, between concealing and desire" (Leone 2010, 78). However this ocular-centric perspective[18] leaves out other four senses in which the meaning of clothes is surely rooted: visual, haptic, acoustic and olfactory. Here we are investigating the *sounding-signal* one, being: *the acoustic* – the physical state in the possibility (the emersion of the acoustic) –, *the sounding* – the activated possibility (the manifestation of the acoustic) – and *the signal* – the semantic process activated by the sounding state (the decay of the acoustic)[19].

Regarding the creation of relations with the environment, exactly these relations are the meaning-makers. The possible relations have been summarized by the scheme (Table 2) given by Rosa (2019, 182) when outlining Weber's [2002]) positions.

	Active relation to the world	**Passive relation to the world**
Affirmation of the world	Adaptation to the world	Contemplation of the world
Renunciation of the world	Domination of the world	Withdrawal from the world

Table 2. Weber's analysis in Rosa's "Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World" (2019,182).

In the table: the active relation to the world highlights a strong intentional paradigm where the *wanting* emerges as modalizator; the passive relation focuses on the *must* modalizator: the environment dominates; the affirmation of the world underlines an *euphoric* axis assigned to the world while the renunciation of the world attributes to the world a *dysphoric* axis. This could be applied to the passed examples:

- Heels: interpellation: domination of the world.
- Ears: reception: contemplation of the world.
- Tracksuit: neutrality: withdrawal from the world.
- Headphones: isolation: adaptation to the world (since the environment is actively modified by humans).

If we substitute the terms obtained by the interlinking of the axes with the regimes of interaction developed by Landowski (2010) we would obtain the following table (Table 3). This gives rise to the possibility to look at the kind of resonance considered *salient* in a society and linking it to the respective *material effects* to see which kind of societal values are majoritarian in the interaction between societies and their environments.

	Active relation to the world	**Passive relation to the world**
Affirmation of the world	Risky	Accident
Renunciation of the world	Programmed	Adjustment

Table 3. Landowski's regimes linked with Weber's axes.

to insert the earbuds, we self-generate the auditory input, namely we choose what to hear. This constitutes a form of self-communication (?).

18 The oppositions proposed by Leone are: modesty and shamelessness; and their contradictory terms: immodesty and coy obtained departing from an ocular perspective about the visibility degrees given by miniskirts or naked body. It has been already emphasized in recent fashion studies that overwhelming attention has been given to the ocular-centric information. We are now trying to fill a gap about the *sounding silhouettes* following Stasiulytė (2018) steps.

19 It would be interesting to see, once all the senses have been covered (obtaining at least four type of oppositions), which kind of correlations and differences can be drawn up; and to understand how all of this destroys or builds up social meanings and bonds.

If we look at Landowski's results interlinked with Weber's perspective, it is visible that the programmed regime affirms the humans while the accident affirms the non-humans; the adjustment highlights a major domain of the environmental factors in their uncontrollability for humans while risky although highlighting an uncontrollability of the world (*affirmation of the world*) makes the humans maintain the first place – they try to manipulate it by using other objects and (human) elements that are, in fact, considered euphorically[20].

Examining fabrics and their values (the semantic competence [Violi 1997]) can reveal openness to communication. For instance, a person wearing a fur coat would likely demonstrate limited openness to debate, exemplifying the value of *isolation* because of the *muted* relation with the environment. However, sartorial identity is rarely monolithic: individuals typically combine multiple materials, thereby enabling more complex identity performances. Therefore, the construction of meaning with the *signalling silhouette* given by an outfit is going to construct a *pattern*. Consider the same wearer pairing the fur coat with high heels: this combination would alter the semiotic message. One might interpret this ensemble as signalling a desire for *admiration*, "wonder, astonishment, or surprise; [something that] marvel[s]" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d., "admire"). This effect emerges through the principle of *semantic contrast*: surprise occurs precisely when two elements conventionally perceived as incongruous (e.g., isolating fur + interpellative heels) are juxtaposed in practice[21].

To summarize, since our aim was to highlight a structure that is suggested from a material perspective, using the pertinence of communication, i.e. a *semantic competence*, we can translate the exemplified values into a semiotic square (Fig. 1).

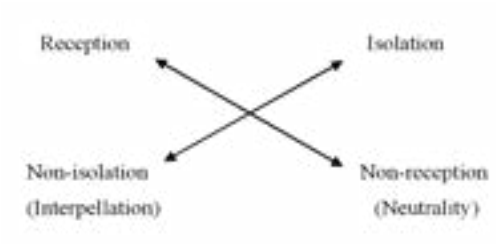


Fig. 1. Semiotic square of Signalling Silhouette

As we are talking about sounds that communicate, we can consider sound as a signal. Therefore we obtain (Fig. 2):

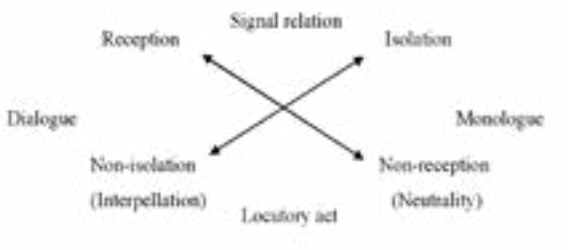


Fig. 2. Semiotic square of Signalling Silhouette with deictic and complex terms.

In Fig. 2, the scheme reception and non-reception gives negotiation while the scheme isolation and non-isolation gives discussion.

We can even say that in these moments, thanks to these connectors, the *sounding silhouette* modifies itself and becomes a *signalling silhouette*. In other words, when the *continuum* is cut in the semiotic(s) square(s), i.e. there is a semantic pertinence applied on the sounding silhouette thanks to a semantic competence, there is the passage from the *sounding* to a *signalling silhouette*. The semiotic square is not used in the sense of a semantic-syntactic representation, not at this level. In fact, it aims to underline how the material sound passes in categories when the act of listening/hearing/calling/ /isolating is considered. And this happens both, thanks to materials (bodies: the tensive process), and concepts (not-bodies: the semiotic square links). The tensive material aspects would give, as topic moments, the following valences: silence, calling, hearing and deafness (Fig. 3 and 4). These topic moments could be seen as *somatic competence* where the body-environment perceives the changing of physical relations.

HOW DO SIGNALLING SILHOUETTES BECOME SOCIALS?

For a signalling silhouette to constitute identity, two conditions must be met: a) the signalling silhouette must be received at a phenomenological plane; b) the signalling silhouette must undergo inferential processing.

Resonance operates through phenomenological relations, as we have already stressed, and can be mapped onto the semiotic square – or more accurately, the continuum between reception and isolation (i.e., interpellation and neutrality) – during inference. In the inference process the meaning of material resonance is settled according to the receiver's *script* (Eco 2010) that is culturally determined[22]. In this perspective the signalling silhouette may result in:

20 It must be said that Landowski does not differentiate between a *dysphoric* or *euphoric* axis linked with the regimes (since both of them can possess it). We applied the axiologization given by Weber (2002). However in Landowski's perspective the risk regime is linked with an emergence from the *subject* which uses the world and tries to dominate it even by employing its qualities; while in the adjustment it is the world that dominates and pushes the humans to produce meaning.

21 Obviously, we never only hear the *signalling silhouette* but it is a *synesthetic* process, as already stressed.

22 Namely "un testo virtuale o una storia condensate [… Per esempio] la sceneggiatura «supermarket» comporterà la nozione di un posto dove la gente entra per comperare mercanzie di diverso tipo, prendendole direttamente senza la mediazione di commessi e pagando poi alla cassa" (Eco 2010, 91) ("*a virtual text or a condensed story* [… For example] the 'supermarket' script will entail the

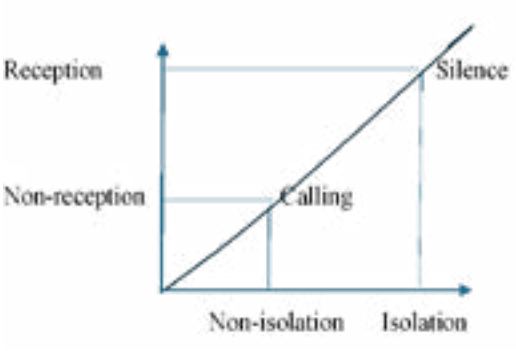


Fig 3. Tensive scheme originating: silence and calling

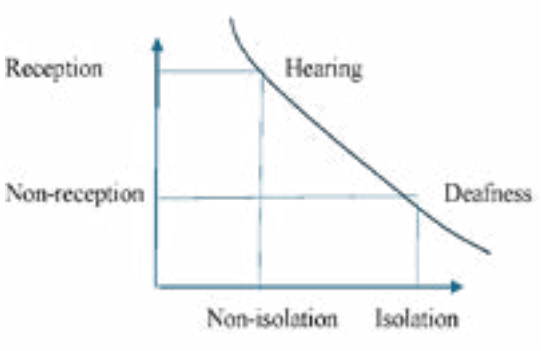


Fig. 4. Tensive scheme originating: hearing and deafness.

- acceptance (creating resonance),
- rejection (establishing isolation from both the values and the sender),
- discussion (generating interpellation directed back to the sound's source, enabling the receiver to stabilize their interpretation of the value(s), thus shifting towards rejection or acceptance to the sender's eyes),
- negotiation (producing neutrality, which – like interpellation – may shift toward rejection or acceptance to the sender's eyes).

We have seen that resonance is firstly a mechanical process. The same happens for inference: "inference is only a transition from one cognition to another, and not the creation of a cognition […] inference […] cannot *produce* cognition at all." (CP 5.327). So the values that we link in these mechanical processes are the ones that build meanings, that act the *sense-making* that is cognition (Paolucci 2021): they are not the mechanical process itself. Values that come from intersubjective (semantic competence) and inter-objective (somatic competence) relations, i.e enactment.

Unlike inference, resonance requires a personal perspective. It aligns more with an emotional than a logical interpretant. Inference involves juxtaposed elements yielding valid outputs, while resonance arises from the subject's beliefs and experiences. It reflects personal values and the emergence of "their own voice" (Rosa 2019, 251). Inference is more detached: it may start from emotion but doesn't require that the values be believed by the one making it for the conclusion to be valid. For example, I can say:

- there is a planet inhabited by flowers;
- the flowers are talking species;
- there is a planet inhabited by talking species.

The inference is correct, and it could also be considered valid if it is proposed to us inside a possible world, i.e. a fantasy narration. This could make us *resonate* if we are *believing* what is being said to us, if there is a *positive relation* to this world. In this case the inference passes to *resonance*. However, if on the manifestation to stop Gaza genocide someone told us this syllogism, even if formally correct (the inference as mechanical process), we would not *resonate*. All depends on the pertinence applied, and the pertinence applied also depends on the environmental context[23]. It is a sanction about the received values inside the possible world experienced by the person. The knowledge about the possible and considered-valid world is obtained by the acts of tension between *reception* and *isolation*. These acts are given by the research about the /being/ of the message sent (i.e. the intention of the signalling and the coherence within the experienced world). In fact tension emerges especially in the values where the /being/ is not clear to the receiver: in neutrality and in interpellation. Therefore these moments could be considered as tensive moments in the process of resonance/isolation, as *continuum* (Fig. 5). "[S]ensitivity to resonance […] implies having a broader sense for the more comprehensive relationships to the world in which everyday life is embedded" (Rosa 2019, 256).



Fig. 5. Signalling tension continuum.

As previously established, this tension is going to be sanctioned at the end of the communication process. What discussion and negotiation produce is partial

notion of a place where people enter to buy various types of goods, taking them directly without the mediation of shop assistants and then paying at the checkout" [translated by the author and italic in the original]).

23 This has been attested by priming studies (Bargh et al. 2001; Meyer, Schvaneveldt 1971). We know that when humans are in specific context, because they are in those, they change the "classes", the "sememes" that they apply to reality in a non-conscious way. For example, if we are sitting at the table ready to eat, and someone asks us to fill the word: -read we will be drawn to think immediately at Bread and not Fread or Thread or others (that can come to us but not as the "first impressions"). This same note is an example of priming: the use of the word /fill/ and not /complete/ (the latter being more correct in relation to /word/); the first being associated with water (so /food/), and the second with words. This has also been widely studied from a semiotic perspective by Eco (2010).

Persona	Social sanction	Signal Valences
Coherent	Aligns with the values sent	Reception
Indifferent	Rejection *a priori*	Isolation
Rebel	Challenging values	Interpellation
Aesthetic/Ascetic	Impossible to classify	Neutrality

Table 4. Personae's typology in relation to social sanction and signalling silhouettes valences.

knowledge – qualifying performances that contribute to semantic competence acquisition and the construction of a mutual understanding system (Prieto 1976[1975]). In fact: "[l]'interpretazione del segnale presuppone l'incertezza del ricevente, determinato dal sistema di intercomprensione [... essendo questo sistema costruito] nel dire dell'emittente e nel comprendere del ricevente" (Prieto 1976, 91, footnote 33)[24]. This acquired semantic competence (Violi 1997) will later be performed (Greimas 1970, 1983), giving rise to a *persona*. In other words, semantic-level resonance – unlike inference – requires not only mechanical processing and shared knowledge but also focuses on pathic beliefs about:

- the proposition's asserted value (the conceptual framework, i.e. the constructed semantic competence, the selected parts of the encyclopaedia [Eco 2016]),
- the valences transmitted by signals (phenomenological plane),
- their coherence with the inhabited world (i.e., scripts and beliefs).

But how is it possible to grasp the value of identity? Drawing on Ricoeur (1990), we highlight the connections and distinctions linked to the concepts of the values[25] of the signalling silhouette.

From signalling silhouettes towards *personae*

Ricoeur (1990) distinguished two types of identity:

- *-idem*: the person perceives itself as ever-being the same, linked with fixed characteristics, like DNA or age.
- *-ipse*: the person discusses about its own values and promises, re-enduring or deconstructing the identity-*idem*.

Critically, observers perceive only the performance (Butler 2006) – a *persona* (etymologically, "mask") that flattens *ipse* into *idem*. Social performances (actions involving multiple actants) construct *idem,* from the Other's perspective. Yet, by inhabiting multiple social spaces, we express *ipse*, embodying nomadic subjectivity (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987; Braidotti 1994).

The relation between the signalling silhouette and the social assigned values gives us the possibility to create a typology of *personae*, social selves, "masks" according to the way the people are sanctioned to the response to social stimuli (Table 4).

Both *rebel* and *aesthetic/ascetic personae* – before being sanctioned, so defined as *persona* – underlines tensive moments (Greimas 1983): passages between states that develop meaning. In fact both *interpellation* and *neutrality* are elements that help clarify the /being/ of the value and therefore are tensive moments, as highlighted before. A *rebel persona* emerges when the values that are discussed/negotiated are rejected *a posteriori* while the *indifferent persona* rejects *a priori*. The difference starts from a phenomenological plane: in *isolation,* the materials do not *allow* the possibility to communicate (an example can be earbuds, when someone is talking to us, creating a barrier), giving rise to the *indifferent persona*; while the *rejection a posteriori* requires some relational status starting from a phenomenological plane. At the end, the *Aesthetic/Ascetic persona* is the only one that embodies the tensive state, a perpetual *almost-being* not only from the phenomenological plane but also from the social sanction (an example is the imaginary linked with the prophets possessed by the gods in Greek or Roman Literature like the Sybils).

The phenomenon of spreadability: social resonance

Personae gains significance only in relation to mainstream artifacts (audiovisual, verbal, etc.), which determine which one is the *coherent persona*, i.e. the performance that aligns with dominant *sounding silhouettes* (and their social contexts). This reveals society's salient values.

Building on Marino's (2015) semiotic reinterpretation of spreadability (Jenkins et al. 2013), we define it as *the dissemination of values validated and shared by a community*. Integrating our framework, spreadability stems from accepted reception, amplifying resonance socially. Conditions for spreadability include:

24 "The interpretation of the signal presupposes the receiver's uncertainty, which is determined by the system of mutual understanding [... this system being constructed] in the speaker's act of saying and the receiver's act of understanding" (*idem*. 91, footnote n. 33; 45; translated by the author).
25 Reception/isolation/interpellation/neutrality.

1. Embodiment of an imaginary perceived as "authentic" (even if artificial),
2. Coherence between the inhabited world and transmitted/ expected values.

The imaginary acts as semantic competence (Violi 1997), amplifying accepted signals, i.e. giving rise to big resonance: spreadability. Phenomenologically, sounds may be "pleasant" or "unpleasant", but social norms (shaped by communal habits) dominate individual experience. For example, punk aesthetics, initially deemed "ugly", became *ugly-chic* once institutionalized (Hebdige 1979) – a phenomenological-pathemic shift proving *human niche is culture*, the *Umwelt* (Uexküll 1934).

Santangelo (2016) analyses the Twin Towers attack as spreadability: a manifestation of the *King Kong* narrative – an external force "welcomed", then turned destructive. When stories materialize through our senses and validate shared beliefs, resonance triggers spreadability. For this reason we are now going to apply the theoretical approach here proposed to a specific movie: *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel 2006)

THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA: WEARING HEELS TO RUN TOWARDS SUCCESS

The movie can be summarized as the story of a girl, Andrea, who, eager to work, starts her career in the world of journalism being the assistant of Miranda Priestly, namely the Editor in Chief of Vogue Runway.

In the first sequence (min. 00:00:00–00:03:10) we see the valorisations that are linked to heels. In the metonymy of the first sequence – the "dressing ritual" –, we can see only one person that differs from the proposition of the world given to us: the Subject: Andrea. She does not wear high heels but boots. This is already a sign of differentiation. This scene gives the watcher the possibility to select the "right" connections inside the movie: the *script* (Eco 2010). Therefore, the watcher can *inhabit* that world and notice assonances between the one s/he/ /them is/are living, giving the basis for the acceptance of the signalling silhouette and further social amplification, i.e. resonance.

If you think that the heels in this movie 1) are not the vehicle to project the values of success and 2) are not highly linked with sound, let's hear what at the 24th minute Andrea tells her boyfriend about "the Clackers". "The Who?" asks her boyfriend. Andrea answers: "They call them Clackers. The sound that their stilettos make in the marble lobby. It's like: 'Clack, clack, clack, clack' And they all act like they are curing cancer or something. The amount of time and energy that these people spend on these insignificant, minute details, and for what? So that tomorrow they can spend another 300 000 dollars reshooting something that was probably fine to begin with, to sell people things they don't need!".

These values Andrea struggles to understand are shown in the intro sequence, that underlines the connection to two different worlds (Lotman, Uspenskij 1975). In one world the women with high heels, eating "light" food, taking the taxi, express a /want/ and a /can/ (Greimas 1983), the realization of their desire: a woman that is fulfilled, that has success in what she does. And in the other, the one of the Subject: Andrea does not take a taxi, she takes the metro: she is linked with a /must/, she is not-fulfilled. She wears boots and eats "heavy" food. The whole movie is the process of realization of this Subject. It is the self-realization, since it has shown to us all the efforts that Andrea invests in the job to have success in it. In fact, the difference between Andrea's and Emily's – the Opponent and the embodiment of the chic girls, the self-realized – value is that the former points at "having success in job"; the latter at "having success in fashion".

If you still think that the value of success is not linked with heels there are two more scenes and the movie poster that clarify – and confirm – this reading (Fig. 6).

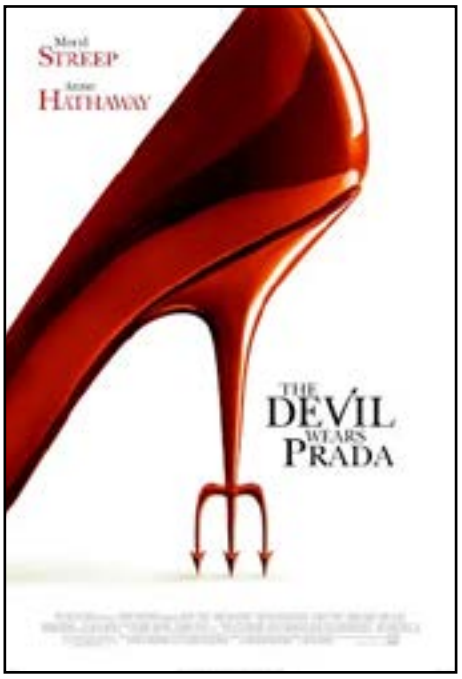


Fig. 6. The Devil wears Prada (Frankel 2006) poster.



Fig. 7. The Devil Wears Prada (Frankel 2006), min. 1:45:10.

One of the film's pivotal moments occurs at 1:11:55–1:12:22, when Emily delivers a crucial revelation after learning she has lost the Paris opportunity – the

fashion world's most prestigious event – to Andrea: "Face it, Andy, you sold your soul the exact moment you put on that first pair of Jimmy Choo's. I saw it". This declaration carries profound semiotic weight: Jimmy Choo is the quintessential brand of shoes, like Louboutin and here it is used to underline the adherence to the fashion world, the acceptance of its values.

Andrea's sartorial transformation reaches its narrative culmination in the final scene (Fig. 7). Having rejected fashion's specific values, Andrea retains only those linked to professional success – notably still wearing heels. Here, she operationalizes knowledge acquired from (fashion's) utopic space (Greimas 1970) while returning to her original world. Though now dressed casually (consciously rejecting high fashion), her persistent use of heels visually anchors her transformed identity as she receives positive sanction from the Newspaper's Editor and Herself – the new Sanctioning Sender. In other words, having learned how to be a self-realized woman.

The film's poster (Fig. 6) visually crystallizes this symbolism through striking metaphorical condensation: the trident-heel rhyme with the title's "Devil" explicitly links footwear to success. In fact Miranda, as the diabolical Editor-in-Chief, embodies fully realized power – the only character who can sanction others. This meaning, generated through visual interpolation of "demonic" iconography, becomes materially transduced through the heel as an object and through *sounding heels*.

While this analysis might appear visually focused, the sonic dimension proves equally significant. At 00:01:30 (Fig. 8), the film establishes a clear sound-heels correlation. In fact, even before seeing Miranda, the "Devil", for the first time we hear the heels (min. 00:05:24–30): stiletto sounds precede her visual appearance becoming her identificatory *signalling silhouette* (min.: 00:25:45–26:40; 00:44:10–15), her *leitmotif*. These audiovisual techniques demonstrate how sartorial semiosis operates multisensorially, with synesthetic affordances always exceeding singular sensory channels, as previously pointed.

This dual resonance (phenomenological and semantic) operates across narrative levels:

- Intra-diegetically, Andrea's "Clackers" monologue positions her initially in isolation – wearing silent boots that reject *a priori* fashion's interpellative soundscape. Her subsequent adoption of "Jimmy Choo" (at min. 17:00) and Miranda's noticing (min. 37:40) mark her progression through interpellation to reception, as she gradually acquires competence in fashion. And the rejection of fashion values is accompanied by the dissolution of heels' sound but their visual presence: the power, i.e. being a self-made subjectivity, persists, but not the request to be admitted in the "fashion realm".
- Extra-diegetically, viewers experience analogous semiosis. Through synesthetic processing, we connect heel sounds to images, to abstract success concepts, forming what Ferraro (2019) terms analogical signs – where material objects (heels) become fused with environmental meanings (boardroom power).

This dual perspective reveals how resonance bridges material and conceptual realms. A phenomenon already illuminated when examining identity through Ricoeur's (1990) *-idem/-ipse* dialectic and spreadability theory (Jenkins et al. 2013; Marino 2015; Santangelo 2016) that we are going to apply now to this case study.

Andrea's *personae* and social resonance

We can consider the identity-*idem* of Andrea as "a person who works very hard and wants to succeed". Why? Because the identity-*ipse* is the identity displayed by Andrea over time – the re-semantization that takes place during the movie: first, she is in *isolation* rejecting fashion values; later, she moves into *interpellation* in order to be accepted in the fashion world, followed by *reception* when she obtains a power position, and finally, *neutrality* once she redirects her life plan. But of all this movement within the semiotic square, what is perceived by others is only Andrea's *persona* – her specific performance (Butler 2006).

Using the theoretical framework previously developed about *personae*, where exactly can we position Andrea?



Fig. 8. The Devil Wears Prada (Frankel 2006), min. 0:01:30.

From the narrator's perspective, Andrea moves from an indifferent[26] through a coherent[27] to a rebel *persona*[28]. It is only when Andrea is becoming a coherent *persona* that she *resonates* with the worlds she is living in, but it is only a form prior to *alienation*, since her voice is muted and, in fact, she leaves her workplace[29].

From the narratee's perspective, the societal effects of resonance are visible: spreadability (Jenkins et al. 2013; Marino 2015; Santangelo 2016). Andrea's signalling silhouette is the incarnation of the self-made woman – the one who, through sacrifice (like the discomfort required to wear heels and the disruption of her intimate life for work success)[30], achieves her "dream"[31].

Rosa (2019) states that resonance arises from being *passively affected by* and *actively relating to*. It stabilizes through repeated experiences along resonant – therefore relational – axes (*idem.*, 239), forming scripts or imaginaries, as discussed above. In the film, this passive relation to the world is portrayed:

- Practically, through bodily modification (walking on tiptoe);
- Semantically, through the unconscious negation of past dreams (working for socially engaged newspapers).

Meanwhile, the active relation is expressed through integration into the social environment (the fashion system) to achieve self-realization. In this case, resonance would happen when dreams align – seeing fashion as a powerful system for success. In fact this is what happens, but once Andrea notices her moral values to be in conflict, the resonance breaks, and she leaves, as appointed above.

From the narratee's perspective, since Western society values willpower and self-made actions – in fact, the practice of wearing heels is considered beautiful only "if the woman maintains her charms – that is, if she can suffer and be made frail without complaining about it" (Brennan 2019, 73). Once these shared lived experiences are displayed onscreen the audiovisual product spreads: generates many memes or remaking/remixing practices on social networks and enters the imaginary. In fact, on Independence Day 2016, *Vanity Fair* analysed which movies from the past 15 years were best remembered, stating: "the degree to which The Devil Wears Prada has penetrated pop culture needs no explanation." (Bradley 2016)

As for semioticians an explanation is not only needed, but clear, thanks to semiotic spreadability: the resonance of the self-made woman's story, who, through sheer will, gains the power to become what she wants. There is a passive acceptance of the imaginary (i.e., "Difficult Task", "Fulfillment of the Task", and "Hero Identification") and an active relation to the world: desiring the same success, often (partially) obtained and realized through meme remixing, remaking or sharing (Marino 2015)[32].

In lifestyles (from a sociological point of view) or *form of life* (Fontanille 2015)[33] perspective we can highlight which practices are driven by these self-made actions linked with heels and what paradoxical relations emerge between phenomenological and social perspectives[34]. From the social perspective, the regimes that emerge are the risky or programmed ones: the world (made of objects and humans) exists and must be bent to or redirected according to human will (even one's own materiality and contingency). From the phenomenological perspective, the regime is that of accident: our lived experience is called forth by the world, i.e. the clacking of heels that grabs our attention.

26 She wears boots and does not care about fashion.
27 She accepts the values of the fashion world, wearing heels and fashionable clothes.
28 She rejects the values of the fashion world (i.e., she leaves *Runway* and Paris Fashion Week) but retains the value of self-realization, as conveyed by heels, which has been valorised throughout the movie.
29 "Depression or burnout refers to a state in which all axes of resonance have become mute and deaf. A person may 'have' a family, work, social clubs, religion, etc., but these no longer 'speak' to them. The subject is no longer capable of being touched or affected and lacks any sense of self-efficacy. World and subject thus both appear lifeless, dead, empty." (Rosa 2019, 253).
30 "I needed the Pavlovian pinched toe and lifted arch, or the strike of the heel's shaft, muted on carpet or magnified on marble, to feel *fully in command* of my own idea of a professional self. They made me feel powerful in a womanly way […] Perhaps I had something to prove; or perhaps I had been made, repeatedly, to think that" (Brennan 2019, 14, italic by the author). Therefore this imaginary and this practice construct a strong "acceptance" of the *signalling silhouette* as experienced value by a part of the community.
31 This imaginary of the self-made woman is another kind of imaginary analysed by Santangelo (2016) in his essay on spreadability: Susan Boyle's success on *Britain's Got Talent*.
32 I have personally tested this cultural phenomenon of spreadability linked with *The Devil Wears Prada* – but not expressively with heels – by sharing a reel of a dialogue between Miranda and Andrea remade (Marino, 2015) in a chat with a friend. The dialogue was displaying /power/ and /will/ and predictably that video was *spread* across the internet obtaining 95.4k views. The video is available here: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CmocnbkIb7S/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.
Another example, this time directly linked with heels can be obtained by looking at the trend diffuses on tik-tok in August/September 2024 that sees a person walks "with attitude", displaying a performance linked with *power* or *will*, on the heels-perceived sounds, i.e. a sounding silhouette. The sound can be found by searching: *heels trends sound* and it is the beginning of the song *One step at a time* (2017) where, in fact, is thematized the *want* and the *(not)-can*: "Everything that you always wished for / / Could be yours, should be yours, would be yours / If they only knew / You wanna show the world, but no one knows your name yet / (No one knows your name yet) / Wonder when and where and how you're gonna make it (Make it) / You know you can if you get the chance / In your face, and the door keeps slamming". An example of the trend is visible in these videos: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdYSonbx/; https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdYAjsS2/; https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdYArw3y/ .
33 "To live according to a given form of life means to conform to a regulative model of action, to pursue a style 'of strategic behavior' [15] aimed at achieving a result which is consistent with the founding axiology" (Marino 2021, 6).
34 It must be clear that, from our perspective, they must be considered as intertwined.

How can this clarify social instances? Since the analysis reveals that the western coherent *persona* is based on self-made actions (that express "will"), we can observe a Western societal preference for risk-managed or programmed regimes, where risk is either eliminated or redirected (Landowski 2010). This is unsurprising, as Western society prioritizes engineering mindsets (Landowski [*ibid.*] explicitly links the programmed regime to the figure of the engineer) and financial strategies (where risk calculation, established by Thomas More and developed from Locke onward, underpins modern thought [Sadin 2018])

Summarizing all of this into an operative instrument, we obtain the Table 5 displayed here.

Modes of existence		Resonance Manipulation and Competence Signal valence considered as value	Performance		Sanction		
	Prothesis and human body		Sound-scape	Human Performance	Receiver sanction about the value of the *signalling silhouette*	(Perceived) *Persona*	Social effect
All types of humans and non-humans (i.e. fabrics) bodies	Ears - *soma*	Reception	Obliged reception: ("natural": *soma*; "artificial": head phones)[35]		Accepted	Coherent	Spreadability, Social Resonance
	Fur Coat	Isolation			Rejected (*a priori*)	Indifferent	??
	Heels	Interpellation			Discussed	Rebel (rejects *a posteriori*)	??
	Tracksuit	Neutrality			Negotiated	Aesthetic/ Ascetic	??

Table 5. Operative instrument to analyse the passages from valences to social values.

CONCLUSION: DO HEELS ONLY "CALL FROM THE WORLD"?

To conclude, we can say that resonance – starting from the phenomenological aspects and mediated by chains of human and non-human actors (their modes of existence, such as air and pressure, and their inter-actions) – produces sounds that convey values understood through our bodies and encyclopaedia (Eco 2010). These values can be accepted, rejected, discussed, or negotiated, pushing the signal toward reception, isolation, interpellation, or neutrality. When there is reception (i.e., acceptance of values, and thus resonance) and the incarnation of an imaginary (i.e., semantic competence [Violi 1997]), spreadability emerges (Marino 2015).

To answer the question: "do heels only 'call from the world'?" Heels function as vehicles of interpellation and ostentation when taken in isolation, but within the syntagmatic axis (like outfits), their value shifts within tensive schemes. The semiotic square remains perpetually susceptible to "explosion" (Paolucci 2010) – a return to tensive states and modulation (Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998, 195). In *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel 2006), heels convey self-realization values, and interpellation allows the Sanctioning Sender (Miranda initially, then Andrea and the Newspaper) to note and evaluate the wearer's performance (Andrea). The Dispatcher may accept, reject, discuss, or negotiate the interpellation. This analysis underscores two fundamentals of semiotics:

- pertinence: clarity about what is pertinent (for both analyst and context);
- materiality-valence dynamics: the passage from materiality-valences on a continuum, where even "fixed" semantic competence remains open to change.

We have observed how this valence-value interplay transforms conceptions of *persona* (identity), not only for the Dispatcher (the Other) but also for the Subject – who can also be the Dispatcher. From the Dispatcher's perspective, three *personae* emerge – coherent, indifferent, or rebel – based on sanction type about the value (same, unknown, or opposite). From the Subject's perspective, the aesthetic/ascetic *persona* persists as lived experience: a tensive state of negotiation/ /discussion where identity is perpetually immersed and

35 Even in isolation there is reception: of the self (both pragmatic and cognitive in Greimas' sense, for a critic to this dichotomic view see Paolucci [2004]).

under construction. Crucially, coherent *personae* drives spreadability phenomena.

Further studies might explore each *persona*'s social effects (that we, in fact, noted in Table 5 with '??'). Here, we have shown how Western culture selects interpellation as a pertinent signalling silhouette, transmitting values of willingness, power, and self-made – values already identified in spreadability/resonance research (Santangelo 2016). Our framework reveals that when interpellating-signalling silhouettes align with Western beliefs (constructing coherent *personae*), resonance follows. The Devil Wears Prada (Frankel 2006) exemplifies this through its pop-cultural penetration. Yet unresolved questions remain: in a society of indifferent, rebel or aesthetic/ascetic *personae*, which social phenomena would arise? Could a society made by indifferent *personae* even exist? Could it be even called a *society*?

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