Exploiting absurdity with the absurd.

- *When Catholicism meets materialism.*
Introduction

Figure 1: Roma 1972

Oversized silhouettes bouncing up and down the runway. Fancy headpieces reflecting light in all directions. Shining silk drenched in gold details. Crowds of people admiring in awe. Model after model gallivanting down the runway with a sense of power. Fashion week or a Sunday at the Vatican?

The over-excessive dressing of the Catholic church is satirized with an ecclesiastical fashion show in Federico Fellini’s 1972 film “Roma”. Nuns, Bishops, Cardinals and the Pope himself participate in this extremely fancy Vatican Fashion Show. Fellini perfectly illustrates with absurdity something, which is in fact already absurd; by over-exaggerating and mocking the vestments of the Catholics, Fellini highlights how over-the-top these vestments actually are to begin with.

When growing up in a completely non-religious household, with a family who was obsessed over new countries and cultures, traveling and exploring new places became a big part of life, therefore so did any old beautiful building along the way, regardless of religious value. Visiting castle after castle, each more magnificent than the next. Gold on every table top till windowsill. Large windows, fit for giants and beautifully carved chairs that must have been fit for
kings. Of course it was understandable to think each of these buildings was made for Royalty. When in actuality, the majority of these beautiful “castles” were actually Churches. As a child, seeing these extremely extravagant Churches, they gave off the assumption that whoever lived there must have a lot of power and even more wealth.

One of the main displays of luxuriousness, or should I say display of power, is seen in Catholicism. The Church is obsessively decorated and the holy people beautifully dressed (see fig 2). There is endless symbolism in the colors and garments that priests, bishops, cardinals and even the Pope wears. Strict clothing guidelines that must be followed or they are at the risk of being frowned upon. What a drama. It all seems a little bit too thought out and extremely absurd. Where is the line between modestly covering up and being decked top till toe in gold? Does god really care for a bishop’s embroidered floral stole\(^1\) (See fig 2) or is he a little more interested in their actual behavior and good deeds. One would hope so.

![Figure 2: Nerses Bedros XIX Tarmouni, the current patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church.](image)

Inspired by the unnecessary extravagance of Catholicism, a men’s street

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\(^1\) The stole is the scarf like piece worn around the neck. It symbolizes clerical office, immortality and the yoke of Christ. The origins of the stole are the towels the slaves wore around their necks. When putting on the stole, the priest kisses the Cross on the stole and prays [July 2010, whycatholicsdothat.com], but what if there are no crosses?
wear collection is created to highlight the ignorance of modern society when it comes to materialism. There is a strong focus on the street wear elements, as a reminder of how simple clothing actually needs to be. In contrast with a focus on the over-excessive use of decoration, the luxurious vestments that seem suitable for royalty and this over-the-top atmosphere the Catholic Church creates. The collection aims to project how unnecessary it is for all this extra extravagance in all parts of life. Raising awareness of the society’s obsession with materialism, by focusing on a place, which should be the most modest, but actually is the most materialistic.

As a designer with a desire for society to question themselves and their actions, following Fellini’s footsteps of getting his point across by over-exaggerating it, seems ideal. The best way for a view to come across and to attract attention is to pursue it in an absurd way. Through a contrasting, absurd menswear collection that will glorify, mock and show the real necessity of the extravagance. Which is that it is not really necessary at all.

Ornamental

When one sees gold, one thinks rich. When one sees silk robes, one thinks luxury. Gold, jewels, accessories, beautiful embroidered fabrics, excessive rituals; The extravagance of the Catholic Church is overwhelming enough, and this is just the material side. Is this excessiveness really all part of worshipping God or is it just a display of power? Walahfrid Strabo (a Frankish monk and theological writer.), who died in 849, wrote: "Priestly vestments have become progressively what they are today: ornaments. In earlier times priests celebrated Mass dressed like everyone else."(O’Meara 2013) ‘Ornament’ - A thing used or serving to make something look more attractive but usually having no practical purpose. (Oxford Dictionary 2015). What actually is the practical purpose of all these luxuries, regarding the morals and values of Catholicism?

Catholic vestments have countless symbolic meanings, including their colour, garment function, accessories and most importantly; use of gold. Technically speaking gold is a yellow precious metal, the chemical element of atomic number 79, used in jewelry and decoration and to guarantee the value of currencies. (2015 Oxford Dictionary). So what is the meaning of Gold in the
Catholicism?

Gold is the symbol of pure light, the heavenly element in which God lives. It is also used as a symbol of worldly wealth and idolatry. Gold is the color for All Saints Day. Gold symbolizes what is precious and valuable. Gold symbolizes majesty, joy, and celebration. Gold symbolizes the presence of God. Gold symbolizes the church’s rejoicing in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Gold symbolizes joy in the light of day and the list goes on. Seems like a lot of reasons to prove that Gold has a real symbolism. Turns out, on December 6, 1868 Catholic vestments made of gold cloth were brought in and were allowed to substitute any other colour\(^2\), but no imitation Gold, of course, only the real (expensive) thing (Walsh 1916).

Today, these symbolic meanings in male Catholic clothing are less comprehensible and it is hard to see the meaning beyond their beautiful colors and golden details. Questions are raised of gender, class, culture and their beliefs. It is not clear how men wearing elegant, dresses, capes and accessories indicate a love of God and a life of commitment to others.

All this confusion of meaning and symbolism of vestments in the Catholic Church is expressed in this previously mentioned scene in Fellini’s 1972 film, Roma. Where a crazy parade of nuns, bishops and cardinals are showing off their silly costumes on a catwalk in the Vatican, as in a fashion show. This scene from Roma instantly screams how Fellini successfully tapped into the already theatrical and visual exuberance of the Catholic tradition, with its parades and rituals and generous imaginary, to create this even more extravagant and slightly perverted version of life in the Catholicism.

The ‘fashion show’ displays that Fellini tended to stay at the comic side of the grotesque spectrum. To make his characters look even ridiculous, he would amusingly enlarge and distort their bodily proportions; a perfect way to illustrate the absurd. Overall pointing out that these flamboyant vestments look more like fancy designer garments rather than the modest, respectful garments they should be.

To reflect this initial display of power vibe felt by the seemingly royal

\(^2\) Except black and violet of course; how else would others see that a priest in black and violet is lower in position than a cardinal dressed in gold? Can’t forget that display of power.
garments worn by men in the Catholic Church, the silhouette of this collection is very large and powerful. An oversize silhouette with a rigid upper half, falling down into an A-line lower half. To keep these shapes, stiffer fabrics such as thick twills and non wovens are used for the upper half, while layers upon layers of lightweight and sheer fabrics are used for the lower half. Using many layers with different techniques such as pleating and gathering, creates the large A-line shape, but enables for interesting movement. These endless layers also add to the over the top, extravagant feeling. The outfits are bouncing ‘ornaments’ down the runway; ‘attractive, but no practical purpose’ (Oxford Dictionary 2015).

To further exaggerate and further mock this extravagant feeling, traditional gold in used in unconventional ways and plays a crucial role in the collection. Inspired by the tradition overuse of golden embroidery (see fig 3) and intricate beadings; oversized, disproportioned and messy versions of these are created. Gold chain instead of gold thread embroidered messily to create fresher patterns. Oversize beads and broaches, create disproportioned patterns and prints. White spray paint over gold embellishments, tones down the luxury feeling to contribute to the mockery of these luxury aspects, showing that it can be beautiful without being so extravagant. Overall creating a rougher beauty,
which adds to the initial street style feel of the collection.

**Question it**

These days, people spend most of their time trying not to offend someone or something that they end up not having an opinion at all. If an opinion is actually voiced, people get more offended by the way this opinion stated rather than the actual issue that is being addressed with said opinion.

Erik Ravelo, a Cuban artist who uses his art to highlight current heartbreaking issues, that he sees as a problem in this world, such as the lack of basic human rights. He bravely chooses to portray some of these horrible issues through his art, in a very confrontational way. This specific project, ‘The Untouchables’ (See fig 4), displays images of children in a crucifix style re-enactment where their perpetrators act as the cross. Clearly addressing the major issues such as pedophilia within the Catholic Church, child sex tourism in Thailand, Gun laws in the US and even obesity in western societies. An easily comprehensible example being the overweight child hanging on ‘Ronald McDonald’, the fast food chain McDonald’s mascot. McDonald’s being the largest fast food chain in the world (Business Insider 2015) and fast-food in general being the largest contributor to obesity in children in the western societies. (Harding, 2015)
Ravelo was pretty much under fire, no pun intended, for these works. People were so absolutely distraught at the fact he used young, nearly naked children, in his artworks, even saying it was pornographic. "I still don't understand why some people are mad at me, but they're not mad about those problems. Some people get offended by the photos but not by the problems the photos wants to talk about." (Erik Ravelo controversial project 2013).

Although society will happily give their opinion of the methods used to portray ones views, but not the actual view itself, using a controversial method to project an opinion seems to be the only way to get attention in the first place. A perfect way to get people to question not only the issue but also themselves.

As a designer with an intrigue in people questioning their own views and morals, this controversial method of expressing his thoughts, Ravelo was an inspiration for a personal method of creating a collection. Combined with a strong opinion on ignorance regarding materialism and an ongoing personal confusion
created by the materialistic world of the Catholic Church. What better way to attack materialism than expressing this inspiration through clothing. In essence, exploiting the absurdity of materialism, through materialism. Clothing playing a major role in materialism, as all we really need clothing for is comfort and protection.

According to Tim Kasser, an author who focuses on the downside of Materialism, and how negatively affects human wellbeing. He argues that emphasis on materialistic values can damage an individual’s well-being, and will result in low life satisfaction and unhappiness (Kasser 2002). Materialistic values are those that mainly focus on wealth, having a lot of possessions or aspiring to attain a particular image. So it seems odd that men of the Catholic Church; Priests, Bishops, Cardinals and even the Pope, who devote their lives to God, helping others and doing good deeds are main perpetrators of materialism. Alike to the issues addressed by Erik Ravelo in ‘the Untouchables, this issues is also often swept under the rug.

To get this point across and no longer ignored, this collection is all about mimicking these “wrong” issues in a “wrong” way to attract attention. With the main focus on Catholic Church, as it is too ironic that a place of worship and devotion to god, is one of the most extravagant, displays of materialism. Hoping to inspire people re-think their own views on materialism. A collection that exaggerates extravagance in a humorous way, highlighting how unnecessary it all is through mocking it.

To attract initial attention eye-catching prints created in messy, aggressive ways will be used. Prints are inspired by the patterns and pictures that cover the traditional male Catholic vestments such as Jesus figures, halos and neatly curved allover shapes such as crosses, stars and leaves. New versions of these traditional patterns are made with messy free hand sketches of random shapes, uneven lines and asymmetrical patterns. These sketches hand painted or silk-screened onto the garments to create allover prints. Confused, angry and humorous facial expressions are also handpainted throughout the collection, in large scale, to evoke emotion. On top of all the messy, sketchy versions of traditional prints are splashes of different coloured paints. Each smeared, brushed, dripped, thrown or sprayed onto the garments in an aggressive manner (see fig 5) have a chaotic, rebellious, street feeling but at the same time an extravagance is felt with large amount of prints and textures happening at the same time.
The over the top use of different techniques, styles, sizes, and textures of prints inspired by but also mocking traditional patterns, embroidery, patchworks and beadings seen allover male Catholic vestments ends up looking quite absurd. Are all these different prints really that necessary? This explosion of messy extravagance gets the point across in a “wrong” to get the “right” attention.

Overwhelmed
The oldest Church in Amsterdam, the Oude Kerk, is cold, dark, eerie and extremely quiet. It has an overpowering atmosphere, not just mentally but also physically. The high ceilings, enormous stained glass windows, intricately carved wooden chairs and the extensive gold details are incredibly beautiful, so much so, that it becomes overwhelming.
On top of all everything already displayed in the Oude Kerk is the exhibition of Tony Oursler. Oursler is an artist well known for his innovative combination of video, sculpture, and performance and interest in exploring the relationship between the individual and mass media systems with humor, irony, and imagination (Oursler 2015). In the exhibition Oursler attempts to "hack" the Church, trying to replace the mystical feeling felt by the church with machines. Using this old but magnificent church as a canvas, a series of videos of talking heads and ghostly figures are projected that comment on our Internet culture in disturbing, funny and often cryptic ways.

These confronting statements made by talking projections placed on the ceilings, stained glass windows or odd objects would not have had the overwhelming effect they did if the atmosphere had been different. Oursler expresses the problem with individuals and mass media systems; modern society’s obsession with technology. His method of combining two overwhelming but contrasting elements;
the church and his statement, is an absurd but clever way to make a point.

Using contrasting elements in a menswear collection to create absurd feeling
will be a way to attract and overwhelm. Starting with the target group, a contrast of
the traditional, elegant Bishop and the rebellious, young male is an intriguing contrast.
The target group is the young, tattooed, pierced, shaved headed male. Scary and
aggressive on the outside but intelligent and full of power on the inside.

The contrast of traditional and rebellious continues throughout the
collection. The typical traditional colours of the Catholic Church; gold, red and violet
will be in contrast with fresher modern colours such as bright yellow and bright
orange who exaggerate boldness and make a statement. Dull black of the traditional
priest who wishes for high power is replaced with deep navy with shades of grey,
which add a nice street vibe to the already vibrant colour palette.

A contrast of finished and unfinished is also a major aspect of the
collection. Unfinished, messy prints will be combined with beautifully finished silk
shirts. While intricate hand stitched embellishments will contrast with dripping spray
paint and raw edged fabric. Functional straps on an overall will contradict hanging
non-functional straps on a sweater just for aesthetic value. This contract of details in
the collection to serve as a reminder that extravagance in clothing is really just a
materialistic factor.
Conclusion

In conclusion, through research into a personal view of the negative side of materialism in today’s society, focusing on the Catholic Church, there are many paths of inspiration. Each path is a driving factor for ideas and conclusions in creating a menswear collection that embodies a person design vision.

The controversial ways of expressing their own personal views made by artists Erik Ravelo and Tony Oursler, helped create idea on how to make a statement within the boundaries of a designer, with the techniques they use. Ravelo’s tactic of exaggerating wrong issues in a wrong way created ideas for expressive print design. While Oursler’s technique of using contrast to create an overwhelming atmosphere enabled ideas of contrasting design techniques to exhibit a personal view.

These dramatic ways the artist of draw attention, cause controversy and express themselves in contrast with the research gained on the Catholic church, enabled for a very chaotic, extravagant design process. Inspiration from extravagant male vestments, their intricate details, powerful silhouettes the atmosphere of the Catholic Church in general in combination with a messy, streetstyle menswear signature is a perfect combination to portray the original view on materialism. At the same time it is a perfect way to express a design vision based in quality over quantity and a love of intricate details and expressive prints.
References


priest-wear-vestments/. [Accessed 04 April 15]