Sign of the times: The discourse of astrology and fashion in the twenty-first century

Katie Baker Jones, West Virginia University

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In October 2021, Highsnobiety published a report on the rise of spirituality in the luxury fashion market. The report’s author noted that, “through religious symbolism, astrology readings, tarot cards, crystals, and yin and yang signs, brands both big and small are aiming to buoy the next generation’s appetite for the metaphysical” (Morency, 2021, n.p). The popularity of astrology is concurrent with a decrease in younger generations’ engagement with organized religion (Morency 2021). The intersection of fashion and astrology is logical considering both discourses are particularly concerned with the manifestations and meanings of cycles (Beck, 2018; Wilson, 2004) and both serve the project of individualization in liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000/2012). But what does the resurgence of popular and fashion media discourses engaging with astrology reveal about identity work, spirituality, and getting dressed in the contemporary world? To this end, I examined the intersection of astrology and fashion discourses presented in the lifestyle and trade press –*The New York Times, The Guardian*, NPR’s *Marketplace*, *Vogue, Teen Vogue, Business of Fashion*, *Women’s Wear Daily,* and WGSN – over the most recent five-year period, 2018-2022. Engaging Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), I explored the relationship between fashion and astrology and how the mainstream media has (re)shaped and intertwined these established fields.

As Mills (1997) argued, “discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity” (p. 15). CDA’s core objective in CDA is to “denaturalize” language to reveal the ways in which it orders our understanding of the world and our way of acting within it (Fairclough, 2010, p. 30). As such, I explore the strategic use of astrology as an explanatory mechanism, how the press has *made sense* of fashion’s appropriation of astrological themes, and how it has been co-opted as a marketing device. This exploration also theorizes the engagement of astrology in the media’s discursive practice by contextualizing it within late-stage capitalism and liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000/2012). The impetus for this examination stemmed from observations made in multiple mass media outlets that Millennials and Gen Z have discovered astrology anew (Beck, 2018; Smallwood, 2019). Thus, this discourse analysis is also an opportunity to explore how astrological discourses are being framed as part of younger generations’ *Lebenswelt* – where “body, lifeworld, proprioception, and social context are all integrated into the texture of worldly being” (Bakewell, 2016, p. 130). As in all CDAs, discourse analysis must be grounded in context. I thus remained mindful of the various crises of the last few years (e.g., environmental degradation, racial and political discord, the pandemic) and their potential influence on the discursive practices I observed since, as multiple outlets noted, uncertain times tend to increase turns towards astrology as a sense-making narrative (Beck, 2018).

Julie Beck of *The Atlantic* stated, “astrology expresses complex ideas about personality, life cycles, and relationship patterns through the shorthand of the planets and zodiac symbols. And that shorthand works well online, where symbols and shorthand are often baked into communication” (2018, n.p.)*.* Astrology works well in the context of fashion for the same reason, but sometimes in ways that run counter to understandings of fashioned identities as a process of *becoming* (Smelik, 2016).Astrological identities were frequently presented as a concrete, unchangeable, and indisputable fact; They were an Aries or Virgo-shaped mold to fit into, with its concomitant array of products. For example, designer Tom Ford and editor Carine Roitfeld *strategically essentialized* their zodiac identities to make sense of interpersonal relationships and ways of being in the world (Haskell, 2019; Hopkins, 2020). Further, Beyoncé is tautologically “pure Virgo” because her “Virgo’s Groove” lyrics manifest everything known to be ‘true’ about the star sign (Stardust, 2022). However, longer form pieces presented the intersection of ‘astrology’ and ‘fashion’ as a form of self-articulation, aligning it with the “self as project” approach of therapy (Giddens, 1991, p 179). Several articles referenced therapy or the psychology field more broadly when theorizing astrology’s present popularity. In this way, astrology was framed as a mechanism for both knowing oneself and presenting a known self to the world. It also served to validate astrology as a means of self-actualization. However, astrology was still *otherized* in the examined discourse. For example, designers were lightly mocked by *WWD* for their superstitions, including a belief in astrology. The author rationalized the designer’s “irrationality” as a common belief structure for those coping with financial insecurity (Socha, 2021, 12).

The discourse on the *materiality* of astrology in the fashion press, on the other hand, was largely devoid of the more nuanced discussions of astrology as a way of being. Fashion objects that referenced astrological symbology were often presented as design details lacking any further explication of their connection to a broader *Lebenswelt.* Both *Teen Vogue* and *Vogue* published multiple ‘shopping guides’ for the astrologically minded with the lists devoted to jewelry or small accessories marked with the wearer’s sun sign symbology. Astrological symbology as mere *surface* design lacked a connection to the inner being of the wearer, another example of “[fashion’s] flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger’s leap into the past” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 261). It also serves to *fetishize* the objects, where the fetishized object is seen as “an example of false values and superstitious delusions [that block] reason” (Wilson, 2004, p. 380). Because the embodiment rituals associated with the Western discourse of astrology in these narratives are kept on the surface, the deep connection to an inner, spiritual self is seemingly optional. Devotees also used this narrative as a way to gatekeep and critique those appropriating the occult in “disingenuous” ways (Morency, 2021, n.p.). I argue the lack of a deeper connection between body and belief in the ‘fashion’ and ‘astrology’ discourse allows it to maintain its liquidity (Bauman, 2012). A product marked with astrological symbology can be ‘so me’ and offer an opportunity for sense-making with solid objects. It can also offer a playful, low-stakes exploration of alternative spiritual narratives for others. Astrological dressing is thus an ideal expression of spiritualism in liquid modern life. It is easy to both consume and discard with minimal risk of offense being taken or given.

Each iteration of a familiar symbology in fashion – like the zodiac – retools the dialectical links between text/context; history/present; sign/signified. The intertwined discourses of ‘astrology’ and ‘fashion’ are mutually beneficial; astrology is provided grounding in materiality while fashion is redeemed with the aura of spirituality. But the linkages are incomplete without an understanding of praxis. Future studies are needed to explore the reception and engagement with these discourses by the core audience – such as millennials and Gen Z individuals who subscribe to astrological thinking – via ethnographic methods. Digital spaces built by and for such adherents would be particularly beneficial in better understanding the connection between discourse-knowledge-practice for ‘astrology’ and ‘fashion.’ Finally, the source material engaged here was largely produced by and for wealthy, urban, and western people. A global and indigenous perspective should be explored to counterbalance the hegemonic co-option of the occult by a neoliberal market logic.

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