

**FASHION, FABRICS AND MANNISHNESS: FROM RUSSIA TO LONDON**

## **\_Deeper about identity**

**\_An afternoon with menswear designer Georgy Baratashvili**

*by Stef Bottinelli*

Young Russian menswear fashion designer Georgy Baratashvili as had an unorthodox start in fashion in his native Russia, but that didn't stop him from pursuing his dream and winning the prestigious Puma Bursary Award in 2007 and 2008, whilst still an MA student at renowned London art school Central St Martin. After re-designing the Puma London Trail Boot - as part of his competition prize - which was sold and sold out in Puma stores all over the world and a year later designing a unisex bag from scratch for the Jamaican Olympic team, Georgy graduated from Central St Martin and started his own London-based, international label, Georgy Baratashvili. Georgy draws inspiration from everything and anything in life, but there's no denying that his collections have strong ballet influences, with their soft jersey draping and sensual lines.

After a chance meeting a year ago where we dance, talked politics, fashion and music, Georgy kindly invites me to his house-come-atelier for afternoon coffee and pastries to continue our conversation and talk about his work.

The designer lets me into his sitting room, scented with the smell of brewing coffee. He's very beautiful, with brown eyes and clear olive skin. He's secretive about his age, but I'm guessing he's in his late 20s, although he could definitely be younger.



*Georgy Baratashvili – photo Irina Galkina*

He looks very athletic and toned – thanks to years of training as a dancer – has an effervescent personality, he's very funny and likes to chat. The perfect interviewee then.

**You approached fashion at 16 for the first time, when you entered the competition *Step into the Future*:**

Yes. I entered it and that allowed me to study fashion at university in Russia, despite having no formal training. *Step into the Future* is an international competition. It's not just aimed at fashion, but at other disciplines too. It's for talented youngsters, whether they do fashion or science or other projects. This was in the mid 90s and that year the competition had an environmental theme. I designed a dress using recycled fabric. It was in the shape of a flower, but it was stylised. It had a futuristic Paco Rabanne-ish look to it, very different from my designs now! I used some pottery from my gran's kitchen to create the structure of the dress. It was quite an architectural piece!

**Very interesting considering that you had no fashion training.**

Exactly! That's why I used pottery from the kitchen! I found a pattern & cutting book from the 50s that belonged to my grandmother and I read through it.

**And with that creation, your first, you scooped the third prize...**

Yes! And that helped me get into university. I first went to a private university in Russia where I did my BA. In Russia one can't choose to do menswear or womenswear, you are taught everything. It's very technical so when I then did a BA at *London College of Fashion*, it was easier for me. In the UK there's more emphasis

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on creative ideas and design, so I think it's great to have both, technical skills and imagination, you can demand and expect more.

**You are now a menswear designer, what attracted you to it instead of womenswear?**

I find menswear more challenging. It's more interesting these days because you can do what you want with it. Menswear now is pretty open to everything but men aren't. You have to be really smart and creative to get a man to buy an item of clothing.

**Most men don't seem to like shopping...**

Exactly. They wouldn't buy an item just because it's pretty or they love the colour. It's a lot more difficult to convince a man to buy something. As a designer you really need to make an effort and I love challenges.

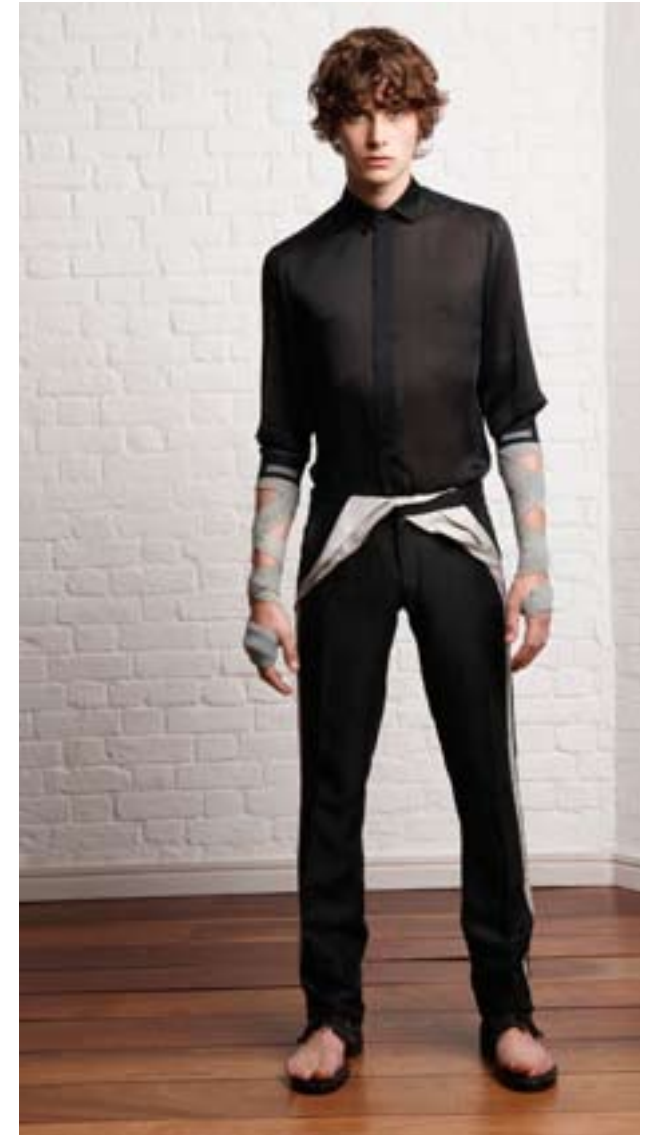
**Do you think the way men buy fashion has changed in the last few years? And has men's attitude to fashion changed?**

Definitely. It's a cultural thing. Men's attitude now is very laid back; they can wear anything without getting strange looks.

**Maybe in London...**

It's changing all over the world. London is more progressive than other places, but you can see it everywhere. There are new fabrics, shapes, technologies now. It's cool.

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**So what was your first approach to fashion as a man? In terms of your own identity within what you wear and what you like, as a wearer of clothing what attracted you to clothes and what attracts you to them now?**

I was attracted to different clothes from a very young age. I would always have picked something that other kids wouldn't wear. I had some funky hats, and balloon-shaped jeans. Some other kids would make fun of me at school, but I didn't care much. I always hated uniforms, and don't like when people dress similar to each other. I was always attracted to the "unique" factor of my clothes. I just had to wear something that nobody else had. It was always important for me as a wearer and it still is, but now I also look at practical side of things. It's an age thing, I guess.

**Talking of identity – an important theme in your work – for your final BA collection at *The London College of Fashion* you took inspiration from microsurgery and face transplantation.**

Basically I watched a programme on TV about face transplants. Then they'd not been done yet, but the technology was there. A year after I showed my collection a face transplant was performed for the first time (in France, on 38 year old Isabelle Dinoir). I was really interested in it. I was wondering, would it change one's identity? When they carry out a face transplant they only transplant the skin, but basically your muscle structure stays the same. So if someone else's face was transplanted onto yours, you wouldn't look exactly the same as the donor. So my collection was based on the notion of identity. It was reflected on the textile prints I used: fingerprints, barcodes, things that can identify a person. I used muscle shapes and body shapes in the pattern cutting. I designed a pair of trousers that reproduced the leg muscles. To recreate that I used a mixture of leather, wool, jersey...

I did the same with a face pattern I used on a funky jacket. The face was right on the sleeves.

**What's identity to you and what is your relationship with the concept of identity/fashion?**

Previously identity was a concept for one of my collections. Thinking deeper about identity in fashion is a necessity. As a designer you need to stand out and do something unique so people can recognise your signature. There is no point of doing something that already exists.

**Georgy, you come from Russia. What do you think is the difference in how fashion is viewed and taught in your homeland and in say, England or Italy?**

The main difference is in England and Italy and pretty much everywhere around the world fashion is a multimillion industry that's extremely important to the country's economy. In Russia fashion is not an industry, it's a collection of small businesses and independent designers and studios. Everyone who can afford to make a collection, and pay to showcase on fashion week is calling themselves a designer. If you are a young designer in the UK you get lots of support. There's a chance for everybody. In Russia you don't have that; you must have money behind you. I think that needs to change. Also Russia is one of the main and biggest consumers of luxury goods, but people prefer to spend money on world known brands. There's a lot of new, young money in Russia and people want to show it off, so they buy all the big designers, the bright, sparkling stuff, things that can be seen from afar so that at first sight people will know that you are filthy rich. (They) often prefer famous name on the label to a good design, and that doesn't help emerging Russian designers and developing industry.



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*photo Dave Purgas*

**Are there countries in the world where you think fashion is becoming really prominent or interesting? I'm thinking outside of the usual Milan, London, NYC, Paris...**

I think Spain is very interesting, I always check out Barcelona Fashion Week, they got very interesting designers.

**Many designers find it difficult to conciliate the creativity and the business running side of things. For your own label, how easy/difficult is it to maintain your creativity when you have to have a business head?**

I think it (depends on every) individual in each separate case. I don't find it very difficult, in fact I find them working together well. For business it's good to sell "white t-shirts" in huge quantities, but you have to send something very creative and outstanding down the catwalk to make everyone talk and remember your name. Then people will pick your "white t-shirt" from million others. It's not difficult to maintain creativity; you just have to apply it correctly.

**Do you think the money side of fashion puts a stop to true creativity?**

Not really, I think you just need to find a balance, what really works for you and your business. Creative clothes might not sell very well, but its gets you good PR, and that improves your sales.

**You mentioned technology earlier, what you think the rapport fashion/technology is these days?**

Fashion and technology are bound together. New materials allow you to create new shapes, and give new dimension or new function to the garment. There are new

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ways of producing clothes. That's what makes fashion today. It seems like everything's been done in fashion, but every time we see something making a comeback, it's coming back in a very modern way: new proportions and contemporary material brought up to speed with modern life. I think fashion is a reflection of what happens around us, it mirrors the society we live in.

**Where do you draw your inspiration to create from?**

It's hard to say as it's different things all the time. Sometimes I can be inspired by some tragedy, but I don't have this.. (place).. where I go to when I need inspiration. Once for example I went to Bath and the bed I had was so hard that I couldn't sleep, so I ended up designing a concept car!

*More infos at: [www.georgybaratashvili.com](http://www.georgybaratashvili.com)*

*Stef Bottinelli was born in Italy and has been living in the UK for fifteen years. She's a journalist and editor specialising in film, music, health and beauty.*