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Michelle Williams' Dress Caught In Ukraine-Russia Propaganda War

By Jennifer Monaghan

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Amid Kiev's standoff with Russia over the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, even the latest spring fashion trend can find itself being used as a tool in the so-called "propaganda war" that is playing out on both sides of the border.

The offending item? An orange and black leather dress designed by French fashion house Louis Vuitton and worn by American actress Michelle Williams on the cover of the April issue of Elle UK magazine.

The dress' orange and black stripes recall the St. George ribbon that was first introduced in the 18th century as the highest Russian military decoration for valor and is often worn by Russians to commemorate the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany.

More recently the ribbon has also been adopted by pro-Kremlin patriots and rebels in eastern Ukraine as a symbol of resistance to what they describe as the fascist "junta" in Kiev that rose to power after the ousting of the former pro-Russian government last February.

So when a photograph of Williams wearing the leather orange and black dress was reused by Ukraine's Elle for their May edition and promoted on a billboard — just weeks before Russia celebrates the 70th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany — some social media users were quick to spot a case of subliminal messaging.

Oleksandr Briginets, a former lawmaker with Ukraine's Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) party, took to Facebook on Tuesday to express his disapproval of the fashion item.

“Putin’s money transforms global consciousness,” he wrote underneath a photograph of the billboard featuring Williams. “The model’s mug should be smeared in the blood of Ukrainians,” he added.

His comments were echoed by other Facebook users.

“Such things don’t happen [by chance], this edition was of course paid for [by the Kremlin or its allies],” wrote user Vyacheslav Panov.

Other users, however, responded with derision at the attempt to turn the Elle cover into a political statement.

“Oh, the great provocateur Louis Vuitton,” wrote user Yulia Brovarnaya sarcastically underneath a photo of Williams.

“Your hysterics bring to mind [the actions of Pavel] Postyshev ... who decided to shoot several Soviet citizens because he saw a swastika in a slice of sausage,” wrote Kateryna Grynko.

Postyshev, a Bolshevik official and a close ally of dictator Josef Stalin, is widely blamed for a wave of repression against political dissidents in Ukraine under Soviet rule.

> Майская обложка Elle Украина
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> Posted by Mikhail Golub on Sunday, 19 April 2015

Despite the fact that the original photo of the dress on Facebook had been shared less than 75 times as of Thursday afternoon, the Russian press soon picked up on the story, giving it their own spin.

“Battle Dress: Kiev Lashes Out at Elle Mag Over ‘Putin’s Hand’ in Cover Photo” reads the headline of an English-language article by pro-Kremlin news agency RT.

“Elle Cover With 'St. George's Dress' Causes Scandal in Ukraine,” ran the headline of an article published by state-run RIA Novosti.

The Elle UK website, however, described the cover as bringing “a much needed pop of spring color to newsstands.”

As the saying goes, there’s no such thing as bad publicity, and the furore over the dress may even give Louis Vuitton's spring collection a timely sales boost.

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