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Il tempo della moda. A Dialogue on Fashion and Time

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Caroline Evans and Alessandra Vaccari are the co-editors of *Il Tempo della Moda* (Mimesis 2019), a collection of writings on the relationship of fashion and time. They are currently preparing an expanded English language edition for publication in the UK by Bloomsbury in 2020. Each being based in a different country, most of their exchanges on the topic have been by email. Vaccari teaches at IUAV University of Venice, Evans at Central Saint Martins in London. Below is an edited selection from their ongoing conversation.

Alessandra Vaccari

Today, the relationship between chronology and fashion demands urgent scrutiny. On the one hand, digital capitalism foment a race towards instantaneity; on the other, there is a pressing need for new, and thoughtful, perspectives on the future. I think it could be useful to compare these opposite tensions in order to understand how fashion impacts on time, and vice versa. To start with the first, digital capitalism has put into question the parameters of sequential clock time.¹ Digital networking is turning the relationships between fashion production, communication and consumption into instantaneous connections.

Caroline Evans

I see the “race to instantaneity” all around me, from the operations of social media to the intermediality of today’s fashion communications industry. To give a concrete example, our fashion communication graduates in London have to work in a world of increasingly faster digital flows, of both information and images; one in which the distinction between journalism and copywriting is often blurred, for example, as they find themselves working for a high end online retailer who is also a publisher, but who uses the cultural capital of the magazine format to sell clothes. So the Internet and the screen have a flattening effect on both culture and commerce, eradicating their differences. In fact you can’t underestimate the importance of screens, and other forms of hardware, in all of this. A similar dismantling of traditional genres and chronologies occurred with the iPod Shuffle function (first released by Apple in 2005) which

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1. Wayne Hope, “Global Capitalism and the Critique of Real Time,” *Time & Society*, vol. 15, nn. 2–3 (2006): 275–302.

had the effect of undoing linear musical history and instead generating a planar as opposed to a temporal version of musical continuity and discontinuity. Zygmunt Bauman's words from 2000 still seem relevant today, even though he wrote this long before the proliferation of new media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter:

[Time] is no longer cyclical ... but not linear either because events and actions succeed each other randomly rather than in a straight line. ... Nowadays we are held together by short-term projects. ... What model of time can be derived from such experience? I suggest a 'pointillist' time ... which consist[s] of points only, no broad brushstrokes and no continuities. That is, though, as far as the analogy goes, because in pointillist paintings you have pre-designed and in-built meaningful configurations. However, in liquid modern life configurations are not given beforehand. ... Living through the moment, one point in time, you cannot be sure to what configuration you will eventually belong when scrutinized retrospectively.²

AV

But to go back to my suggestion that we might contrast this instantaneity with emerging ideas about the future, the word "future" is currently accruing a power and communicative strength that it perhaps hasn't had since the 1960s. Then, it was associated with the optimism of space travel and new technology, whereas today it comes back via the "No Future" slogans of environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion. At the same time, debates about sustainability are reviving the word "future" as a possible way forward for fashion. The potential appeal of these debates can be understood by looking at the "futurewear" of the French fashion designer Marine Serre. She has been able to speak to a new, young and stylish audience with her "ecofuturistic" line made of end-of-cycle products. Since 2018, her work has won over even those of my students who were the most resistant to the idea of sustainable fashion, which they rationally acknowledged to be important, but often considered insufficiently fashionable and interesting in design terms. Here in Venice, I've had endless talks with the Masters students on the role that fashion can and should play in the creation of a better future. And if, until recently, their answer was that fashion has no moral obligation towards the future, their perspective is now changing.

CE

That is good to hear, and it is also a far more overtly political perspective, in the broadest sense of the term. You refer to the Utopianism of the sixties, which you contrast with today's anxieties about the future of the planet as expressed by Extinction Rebellion activists. But the phrase "no future" also reminds me of its nihilistic and angry expression by British punks in 1976, in the period after the hippy movement, that you see for example in Derek Jarman's film *Jubilee* (1978). The film is in part a critique of a failing British welfare state in a period of high unemployment. This perhaps takes us away from our discussion of time, but I just wanted to contrast this punk nihilism from the 1970s with the rhetoric of today's climate change activists which, as you say, does presuppose a belief in the possibility of change that is bound into the notion of a better future.

AV

Yes, but when we say "future fashion" today, there is a word missing: industry. Strictly speaking, we are talking about whether the fashion industry has the capability to overcome the dystopian realities of unsustainable growth and to contribute to the reinvention of a better, more sustainable world. It is true—as you argue—that the current discourse on future fashion is more about a paradigm shift than a category of time; in this sense you are right when you say that this discourse takes us a bit away from the topic of time.

2. Zygmunt Bauman quoted in Agnès Rocamora, "New Fashion Times. Fashion and Digital Media," in *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*, eds. Sandy Black, Amy de la Haye, Joanne Entwistle, Regina Root, Agnès Rocamora and Helen Thomas (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 64.

CE

Indeed, though it is relevant to the precarity of workers in the post-Fordist economy of today's "fast fashion" production. Mark Fisher wrote eloquently about how economics impacts on sensibilities when he described this new kind of work time:

Work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you wherever you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions. As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems. To function effectively as a component of just-in-time production you must develop a capacity to respond to unforeseen events, you must learn to live in conditions of total instability, or 'precarity,' as the ugly neologism has it. Periods of work alternate with periods of unemployment. Typically, you find yourself employed in a series of short-term jobs, unable to plan for the future.³

AV

That is one very important aspect of fashion's multiple temporalities that we cover in our book, but not the only one. We decided to avoid the classic threefold categorisation of time as past, present and future in favour of a theoretical framework that allowed us to explore the temporal dimensions of fashion in their simultaneous coexistence. We have come to identify: industrial time, antilinear time, and uchronic time. The first defines and expresses the seasonal nature of Western fashion as an industry, and shows how this has impacted on workers and wearers alike. The second looks at fashion design as a ceaseless process of quotation, reconstruction and recombination of motifs, in which nostalgia and revivals play their part. The third construes fashion's "imaginary" as a form of alternate history that asks "what if?" It's within this framework that the current discourse on future fashion could find a place, between industrial time and uchronic time, as a way for the fashion industry to reinvent itself ethically and to define a political agenda for change. This is one of the reasons why the concept of uchronic time is particularly fascinating to me. Another reason is the fact that it is considerably less researched, compared to industrial and antilinear time. The concept of fashion as uchronia comes from Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System*, first published in 1967. Just as u-topia means no place, u-chronia suggests no time, a time that does not exist, according to Barthes.⁴ On the one hand, uchronic time is about imagined times; on the other, the uchronic manipulation of temporal processes can have "transformative effects" and "real implications" when it allows people "to bring the intended future into existence," as the anthropologist Felix Ringel stated.⁵

CE

That brings us back to speculations about time that are simultaneously metaphysical and grounded in the realities of the fashion industry. It is quite a stretch, to build a bridge that can span those two. Your Ringel quotation epitomises it perfectly: "to bring the intended future into existence" is both a mythopoetic proposition and a concrete, political goal for Extinction Rebellion and other activists today. I have to credit you with suggesting the category of uchronia as one of the structuring propositions of our book because it has opened up so many possibilities for innovative thinking. One of the several things I love about the concept of uchronic time is its extreme reach, from the most conservative and retrogressive fashion narratives to the most radical, creative and life-changing ones. So on the one hand it encompasses the way that a global heritage brand creates its own romantic, fictional past purely for marketing purposes; one such origin myth is the 2016 fashion film *The Tale of Thomas Burberry* directed by the British documentary filmmaker Asif Kapadia that combines found footage from the First World War with blockbuster fiction film techniques to shape a film narrative "as an exercise in brand archaeol-

3. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley UK: O Books, 2009), 33–4.

4. Roland Barthes, *Système de la mode* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).

5. Felix Ringel, "Can Time Be Tricked? A Theoretical Introduction," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2016): 26.

ogy” as Nick Rees-Roberts puts it so well.⁶ But on the other hand, the concept of uchronic time also enables all kinds of progressive narratives. These range from Serpica Naro, a fictional designer created by a group of activists in Milan who staged a number of interventions in the designer’s name during Milan Fashion week, to the phenomenon of Afrofuturism, which offers an inventive reclamation of black identity through performance, self-fashioning and styling. As Sonja Eismann has written,

In Afrofuturism’s self-fashioned universe of alternative histories, geographies, and identities, members of the African diaspora imagine themselves as utopian space travellers with roots in Egyptian mythology as well as in space-age mysticism, unbound by the chains of slavery and racism.⁷

Eismann goes on to cite Laura Halvin’s claim about Afrofuturist fashion in particular: “Time, for an Afrofuturist, is a fluid concept, and the terms past, present and future aren’t necessarily linear.”⁸ In all these examples, time becomes emmeshed with narrative, and I am also beguiled by the way in which the very concept of time is subverted by the category of uchronic time.

AV

In a similar vein we can also think about gender as a category that spurs us to think outside the box. In her review of our book, the author Benedetta Barzini wrote that we paid more attention to women’s time than to men’s time; and she wondered why the only male presence in the book was the dandy.⁹ I found the way she addressed gendered time very engrossing, and I agreed with her when she wrote that we have paid scant attention to men’s time. But this is also true with regard to the dandy. Our fascination with the dandy’s temporality is due to the fact that he spent hours in his morning routine refining his appearance and, in doing so, he subtly criticised men’s time as “efficient time,” or the time of production. In 1862, George Brummel’s biographer Jules Amédée Barbey d’Aurevilly described the lengthy time required to distress Brummel’s coat as an extremely sophisticated act, and a social provocation.¹⁰ This practice is also a good example of what could be seen as a critique of temporal normativity, and the materialisation of an alternative temporal model to men’s time; a time that could be said to be queer.¹¹

CE

For the new English language edition we are delving deeper into some of these overlooked categories: not only queer time, but also women’s time and colonial time (the latter being a construction of the colonisers not the colonised). Until you wrote this I had not thought of how these alternative temporalities might also be extended to think differently about men’s time. But why not? Actually, when Judith (a.k.a. Jack) Halberstam developed their ideas about queer time, they commented that while previous studies had focused on white gay men, theirs would instead focus on a wide variety of lesbian and transgender subcultures.¹² So Halberstam’s more fluid model of gender and intersectionality might actually help us to think through Barzini’s undoubtedly very good point better than Julia Kristeva’s writing on “women’s time” that has also been suggested to us.¹³

6. *The Tale of Thomas Burberry*, (2016), found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6D5IZtDCS5c>, (last accessed November 30, 2019). Nick Rees-Roberts, *Fashion Film: Art and Advertising in the Digital Age* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 39.

7. Sonja Eismann, “Afrofuturism as a Strategy for Decolonising the Global Fashion Archive,” in *Fashion and Postcolonial Critique*, eds. Elke Gaugele and Monica Tutton (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 64–73. This quotation 67–8.

8. Laura Halvin, “A History of Female Afrofuturist Fashion,” *Another Mag*, (September 16, 2015), <https://www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/7791/a-history-of-female-afrofuturist-fashion>, (last accessed November 28, 2019).

9. Benedetta Barzini, “Un abito stretto tra il non ancora e il non più,” *Il Manifesto*, (November 24, 2019), 10.

10. Jules Amédée Barbey d’Aurevilly, *Du Dandysme et de George Brummel*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Poulet-Malassis, 1862).

11. Carla Freccero, “Queer Times,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 106, no. 3 (2007): 485–94.

12. Judith Halberstam, “What’s That Smell: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives,” *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2003), <http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/ps/printjha.htm>, (last accessed December 1, 2019).

13. Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1981): 13–35.