

Archaeology of Fashion Film, London, 6 July 2018

Fig. 1: *Archaeology of Fashion Film* Conference Poster, Central Saint Martins (2018).

Photograph. © Maria Korolkova.

On 6 July 2018, Caroline Evans, a fashion historian and theorist at Central Saint Martins, and Jussi Parikka, a media archaeologist at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, co-organized a full-day conference at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. Titled *Archaeology of Fashion Film*, it stemmed from their eponymous research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which they run with Marketa Uhlirova, a fashion film historian and curator at Central Saint Martins, and myself.

Evans and Parikka opened the day by introducing the research project, which investigates fashion film in two crucial periods of technological and cultural change: the beginnings of cinema between 1895 and 1929, and the twenty-first century, when the digital moving image rapidly came to the fore in commerce and culture. Drawing on media archaeology, it establishes a connection between these two periods, proposing that, while fashion film is not a novel product of the digital age, as is often assumed, the periods act as a critical prism for understanding each other (see archfashfilm.arts.ac.uk).

Wanda Strauven, a media archaeologist at Goethe University Frankfurt, opened the conversation with her keynote session, 'Text, texture, textile: A media-archaeological mapping of fashion and film'. Her paper took the form of a mapping process, drawing connections between fashion and film across history, materials and technology. The result of this mapping was a decentred, complex web of intricate connections. She focused on cinema

as a means to inscribe movement rather than as mere visual representation, noting that textiles are also a writing system, with its own technologies of weaving, stitching and knitting, akin to the film processes of editing and coding. She explored how both early cinema and digital film are connected to textile as a technology by exploring the etymology of the word ‘screen’ and the history of fashion accessories, such as jewellery, in which celluloid was used as a material before the cinema screen, among others.

Fig. 2: Wanda Strauven presenting her keynote paper, feat. her Media Archaeological Map (2018). Photograph. © Maria Korolkova.

Next, I prefaced a curated screening of fashion film with an introduction to historical fashion film, tracing its development from its earliest origins to the present day. I aimed to demonstrate that both early analogue and later digital fashion film are marked by intense transformations in aesthetics, audiences, cultural sensibilities and technologies, from Louis and Auguste Lumière’s Cinématographe to the birth of the Internet.

The screening focused on movement, content, editing styles, lighting, setting and colour in fashion film. It included early newsreel items (c. 1908–27); fashion films produced by avant-garde and independent filmmakers such as Marcus Tomlinson; a promotional campaign for Saint Laurent, produced in 2010, when fashion houses began to engage with film more seriously; and two films produced by Central Saint Martins students, Vitoria de Mello Franco and Sahil Babbar, in response to the research project. The films were shown in thematic rather than chronological order, allowing new connections and comparisons to be made, and reflecting the project’s nonlinear use of history.

Uhlirova then chaired an industry panel on contemporary fashion film with Raven Smith, a creative director and former commissioning director at the global video channel,

NOWNESS, and fashion filmmakers Stella Scott and Isaac Lock. She pointed out that all of their work contrasts with the historical fashion film exemplified by the previous screening, as rather than focusing on the display of dress and visual spectacle alone, they prize the narrative instead. Whilst fashion in motion alone was once pioneering, the panellists commented that the digital age has created more sophisticated demands as this content now aims to capture the fleeting attention of viewers scrolling through social media platforms such as Instagram. A prevailing theme within the session was the balance between commissioners' commercial aims and artistic freedom. The panellists were untroubled by this, and mentioned that brands are now increasingly giving filmmakers free-reign to produce creative content.

In her following paper, 'Floating chiffon and misty tulle: The materiality of fashion in motion', Beatrice Behlen, senior curator of fashion and decorative arts at the Museum of London, explained that dress encountered in a museum archive is restricted: static, and never worn again. Film, on the other hand, allows us to see dress in motion: how it falls on and moves with the body, and how it reacts to external factors. She demonstrated this through a 1918 British Pathé film, which had been catalogued as a fashion film. However, her research uncovered that the women featured were in fact members of the British aristocracy at a social gathering. In hypothesizing the reasons for its mis-identification, such as the evocation of fashion parades when the women walked towards the camera in a line, and the women's social interactions (which contemporary fashion films mimicked by way of narrative), interesting reflections on the nature of fashion film were brought to light.

Nick Rees-Roberts, who specializes in media and cultural studies at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University, presented the last paper, on 'The paradox of contemporary fashion film'. By this, he referred to the lack of a standard definition of what constitutes a fashion film as it has re-emerged through digital technology. His paper included examples of the

wide range of forms that fashion film can take, from short independent to feature-length Hollywood films. This includes big-budget promotional films for global fashion houses that draw on traditional advertising and covert brand promotion on social media.

Yet this notion of paradox also continued the deeper theme discussed in the preceding industry panel: that of commerce versus culture. He argued that digital fashion film repackages both commerce and culture, functioning as marketing and promotion, but also serves as a vehicle for artistic expression and social critique – a creatively and commercially productive tension.

Finally, Chris Breward, director of collection and research at the National Galleries of Scotland and visiting professor of cultural history at Edinburgh College of Art and the University of Edinburgh, presented a deft summary of and response to the day, before chairing a plenary session with the project team. He remarked that the media archaeological methodology played out in useful ways throughout the papers. Several discussed minor and marginal themes, which add up to something greater than the sum of their parts. He pointed out that this idea of bringing neglected work and areas back into focus was central both to the day and to the *Archaeology of Fashion Film* project at large.

He then posed questions raised during the day to the project team, in a concluding conversation that spanned methodology, genre, medium, museology, legacy and geopolitics. Uhlirova noted that, in relation to broader themes of fashion, film is distinct as a profoundly different and transformative space. I added that movement is a crucial notion to fashion itself, which constantly changes and evolves back and forth, and therefore it is essential to use a medium like film to capture this motion. Evans connected this notion to the project's nonlinear conception of time. Parikka observed that contemporary fashion film is a living archive, spreading cinema across platforms and materialities, and constantly referring back unto itself.

Fig. 3: Chris Breward, Caroline Evans, Jussi Parikka, Marketa Uhlirova and Lucy Moyse Ferreira in Conference Plenary Session (2018). Photograph. © Lynne Finn.

These encounters between academics from the fields of media archaeology, fashion history and film studies, and current film industry practitioners, allowed the conference to connect these areas for the first time, and propose the beginnings of a new foundation for understanding fashion film. Although the conference's scope was largely western-centric, it established a methodological approach that can be applied going forward to a broader range of examples.

Contributor details

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