Excavating fashion film: a media archaeological perspective

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Abstract. In the emerging 'video-first world' of the last decade, global fashion brands have made the moving image an integral component of their digital marketing strategies. As a result, both the industry and popular perceptions of fashion film have been increasingly colonized by the notions of branding and promotion. Recent scholarship on fashion film too has put the fashion brand at the centre of analysis. This article argues against any such premature fixing of fashion film's identity. Instead, it proposes shifting the existing perspective by reframing fashion film as not only a product of the fashion industry and associated media but also one of the cinema industry and culture. Drawing on media archaeological models of 'excavation' and 'parallax historiography', the article examines contemporary digital fashion film in parallel with fashion film of the early 20th century – a juxtaposition that helps to recapture the phenomenon's remarkable diversity and open possibility in both periods.

Keywords. digital cinema • early cinema • fashion branding • fashion film • media archaeology • media history and theory • parallax historiography

To analyse contemporary fashion film at the time of its rapid development is a task both compelling and daunting. For how to grasp a form that is still in flux? One whose manifestations, and the ways in which it is experienced, are constantly altered with the introduction of new technologies and platforms, alongside fashion's own changing practices? Surely, fashion film's disorderliness has direct ramifications for the very possibility of defining it. This lack of stability, however, need not become a setback. Rather, it can be regarded as an opportunity to embrace the medium's mobile and shifting identity as something that must be repeatedly re-framed and re-conceptualized. This seems a timely point at the present moment when fashion film is progressively dominated by global brands, and when critical accounts as well as popular perceptions of it are becoming homogenized.

The Archaeology of Fashion Film project (as described in the Introduction to this issue) allowed for a conceptual broadening of the perspectives on fashion film, by connecting the rapidly changing field of digital fashion communications today with a hidden history of fashion film at the time of its first emergence. Such an excavation of a forgotten media form, encouraged by the unorthodox historiographical methods of media archaeology, seeks to recast in a new light our own technological present (Elsaesser, 2004, 2016; Huhtamo and Parikka, 2011; Parikka, 2012; Strauven, 2013; Zielinski, 2006). Although there is a poetic dimension to this project of unearthing, it is not simply a case of romantic nostalgia or fetishization of the past. Nor does it seek to legitimize the present in the past by locating its foundations there. Rather, the project systematically juxtaposes the past and the present in order to actively challenge our conceptualizations of both – in what Catherine Russell (2000) calls 'parallax historiography'.

The alignment between the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, as two periods of wide-reaching cultural change, has been frequently evoked among cinema historians and media theorists (Elsaesser, 2016; Friedberg, 1993; Hansen, 1994). Spurred on by the proliferation of new electronic media and a rediscovery of archival films (especially of the early silent period), the motivation was largely to challenge the monolith of classical narrative cinema, with its unitary modes of representation and spectatorship (Elsaesser, 2004; Russell, 2000). In reference to this bi-focal viewpoint – which I have myself already evoked in two articles published in 2013 (Uhlirova, 2013a, 2013b), arguing fashion film is nothing new – this article asks more specifically what implications the knowledge of the past has for the present. To that end, I perform a double recovery of fashion film by making a 'diagnosis' of its present while also 'excavating' the present in the past.[1] I am interested in its diverse genres and iterations, and the ways they operated – and still operate – in the fashion, film and media industries. Ultimately, my aim is to argue against locking fashion film into one single perspective and, instead, I suggest we think of it as a plural entity with constantly shifting horizons.

Beginnings

A juxtaposition of fashion film at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries reveals some pronounced parallels. In both periods, it emerges as a mode of cinema distinguished by an aesthetic of display, one that privileges short visual spectacles, presentational (exhibitionist) style and musical scores over narrative continuity and dialogue – what Tom Gunning (1989b) and others have theorized under the conception of the cinema of attractions.[2] It is also comparable in its presentation of the body and dress on the screen, including frontal, tableau-like framing, a direct rapport between the performer (or object) and the film camera (audience), and a peculiar dynamism between motion and stillness. While these recurring aesthetic tropes are undeniable,

the purpose of this comparison is not merely to trace formal analogies between the two. Nor is it to reduce the two to sameness by disregarding their historical specificity. Rather, it is to suggest more underlying affinities between them, to do with wider transformations of the visual cultures of fashion and cinema as they became closely interconnected.

Firstly, in each period, fashion film became part of a novel media experience produced by a new technology of the moving image and the screens on which it appeared. Characterized by visual spectacle and sensory intensity, this experience promised to revitalize (and threatened to destabilize) established modes of fashion representation hitherto anchored in the printed word and still imagery. As fashion was being re-constructed in the new media, the fact of technological novelty became a vital focus. The new dimensions of motion, temporality and change called for a novel set of techniques and effects – from editing, in-camera trickery, close-ups and colour in early cinema, to digital image manipulation, CGI and 3D scanning at the turn of the new millennium. Unsurprisingly, these attractions and wonders were accompanied by vigorous speculation as to what the marriage of fashion and the new media may hold.

Secondly, at the cusp of each century, fashion film emerged rather slowly and tentatively, amidst experimentation with new forms and approaches, and in search of a new audience. Encumbered by various technical constraints, as well as systems of production and circulation yet to be industrialized and institutionally regulated, it was also blissfully free from any one given definition and indeed theorization. In other words, each beginning of fashion film is bound with a distinctly chaotic plurality.

Thirdly, there are important similarities in the ways in which fashion film in each of the periods was disseminated and consumed. Its exhibition was not restricted to a single mode but was instead dispersed across a whole gamut of spaces and contexts: cinemas, fashion shows, retail environments and variety theatres in the early 20th century, and the internet – desktop and mobile screens – in the early 21st. These disjunctive exhibition practices went hand in hand with a fragmented and distracted spectatorship, marked by its difference from the viewer's illusionist absorption associated with classical cinema. Another shared aspect of fashion film exhibition in both periods is its global reach, though not unproblematic and not without implications of geopolitical and cultural hegemony. Early fashion films circulated widely. By mid-1910s, the French giant Pathé Frères, for example, operated via branches in more than 40 major cities across the globe, including Hong Kong, Singapore, Buenos Aires and Cairo (Norden, 1981). In 1913, *The Bioscope* proclaimed that, thanks to the cinema, 'fashions of every kind can be viewed and appraised by women all over the world, no matter how far removed they may be from the great centres of elegance and commerce' (p. 91). Similar assertions of fashion film's globality also proliferated in the new millennium around Nick Knight and Peter Saville's

SHOWstudio.com, the most significant early online platform for fashion film. Knight, especially, frequently extolled the democratic potential of digital media, with the capacity to connect to worldwide audiences instantly and freely (see, for example, Rowan, 2003: 45). Characteristically, one of the website's early projects, the Warholian webcam broadcast *Sleep*, was introduced as 'the first ever global, live-streamed fashion shoot' (SHOWstudio.com).

Media beginnings are fascinating – and instructive – so long as they are viewed as plural and open to question, rather than fixed in a teleological search for *the* origin. Capturing a sense of limitless possibility, they prevent us from readily locking media down to a single identity. Here, media archaeology provides a useful critical perspective that views historical fashion films not as outmoded 'archival treasures' belonging to a bygone era but as still very much present – not only through the surviving artefacts, many of which have now been digitized and made accessible online, thus 'undo[ing] historical distance simply by being present' (Ernst, 2011: 57), but also, in a less literal sense, by provoking contemporary sensibilities and even resonating with contemporary practices.

Thinking fashion film I: the present

The term 'fashion film', though deceptively simple, is slippery and seems to escape any rigid definition. It is also much older than the digital era in which it has gained renewed currency: having originated in the early 1910s (*The Bioscope*, 1911: iii), it was used periodically throughout the 20th century to refer to a range of different genres and film forms. These span feature-length fiction films that are set in fashion milieus or that narrativize fashion (Stanley Donen's *Funny Face*, 1957); feature-length documentaries on fashion (Frédéric Tcheng's *Dior and I*, 2014); newsreels and other silent non-fiction films showing fashion; and recorded fashion shows. In the fashion industry, though, the term has a more specific meaning, upheld by websites such as SHOWstudio, *Business of Fashion* and *Nowness* as well as the ever-growing number of festivals that champion fashion film, held in major cities from Milan, Paris and Los Angeles to Santiago, Istanbul and Cape Town. Here it is generally understood as an umbrella term for short multifarious works that display current fashions, reinforce brand 'narratives' or tell 'stories' about wider fashion cultures with at least some degree of creative ambition.

Whether big- or low-budget, self-initiated or commissioned, editorial or promotional, fashion films have been made by practitioners with backgrounds in a range of disciplines: fashion photography, design and styling (Nick Knight, Glen Luchford, Hussein Chalayan, Gareth Pugh, Daniel Obasi, Ibrahim Kamara), cinema and film advertising (Lucrecia Martel, Baz Luhrmann, Spike Jonze, David Lynch), experimental and artist film (John Maybury, Kenneth Anger) and, increasingly, dedicated fashion filmmaking, mixed-media art illustration, animation and collage (Ruth Hogben, Mat Maitland, Quentin Jones, JJ Guest).

With enormous capacity for seamlessly merging with other media forms, fashion films have linked up a wide array of cultural practices. Consider films as diverse as Andrew Thomas Huang's music promo for Björk's *The Gate* (2017), in which the musician is dressed by Gucci and embroidery artist James Merry; Patagonia's *The Stories We Wear* (2016), in which the company ambassador Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll reflects on his climbing adventures; Terrence Neale's *Original Is Never Finished* for Adidas (2017), which, to a remix of Frank Sinatra's *My Way*, with its chorus of black performers and athletes; Musion Events' *No7 Lift & Luminate Triple Action Serum* commercial featuring a 52-year-old ballerina Alessandra Ferri dancing with a holographic image of her 19-year-old self; or JJ Guest's seconds-long 'digital sculptures' for *Self-Service* magazine's Instagram feed (published between June and September 2017) in which Jessica Segal's back-stage photographs at fashion shows by the likes of Prada or JW Anderson are dissected into elements that are subsequently re-animated. Magpie-style, these films have repurposed elements of fashion photography, print magazines, painting, collage, sculpture, dance, music, sport, advertising, animation and social media as well as documentary and narrative film.

As Gary Needham (2013: 103) observes, the advent of fashion film in the digital era has coincided with an extensive transformation of fashion into a hybrid industry in which design, media and entertainment have converged. In this highly mediatized environment, the screen has become the 'key point of contact for the experience of fashion culture', a uniquely 'layered' experience offering the public backstage access to the exclusive world of high fashion. This period has seen an exponential growth[3] in the popularity of the moving image – what marketers have begun to call a 'video-first world' (Brooks, 2017) – which has thrust fashion film centre stage. In the first book dedicated to the subject, and elsewhere in this journal, Nick Rees-Roberts (2018) documents its rise in the fast-changing (and converging) landscapes of contemporary fashion and media. Drawing on Henry Jenkins's theories of participatory and transmedia culture, he discusses fashion film as part and parcel of a digital realm in which media content is created in diverse incarnations and diffused online across variously interconnected platforms, a phenomenon that has been accelerated by social media. In the process, he argues, well-established traditions of editorial, marketing, advertising and consumption have been profoundly shaken up.

While there is a consensus that digital fashion film spans diverse genres, formats and media platforms, it is often assumed to have a clearly defined role, if not destiny, in fashion marketing and promotion. It is certainly true that, since the 2010s, major fashion and sports brands have developed increasingly sophisticated digital moving image strategies. They have sought a 'more authentic and aspirational' approach than traditional advertising, widely considered to be in decline (Angileri, 2016). Digital fashion film is now at home in an environment where the personal and the editorial collide with

the promotional. Take the series 'Women's Tales' (since 2011 and still ongoing), in which Miu Miu has commissioned short films from female directors internationally, starting with Zoe Cassavetes, and including Hiam Abbass, Naomi Kawase and Haifaa Al-Mansour. Each of these directors has been given a free hand to create a personal film, as long as this was about women, and as long as they were costumed by the brand. Or consider 'The Performers', a series of 11 three-minute film acts co-commissioned by *GQ* and Gucci in 2017 and 2018. In these films, digital contents directors such as Stella Scott, Barbara Anastacio and Johnny Hardstaff created intimate glimpses into the minds of influential cultural icons including musician Bobby Gillespie, choreographer Michael Clark and robotics expert Hiroshi Ishiguro, all dressed by Gucci's creative director Alessandro Michele and presented in highly aestheticized mise-en-scènes. Such is the regime of free online content that seamlessly reconciles creative expression with corporate interests and entertainment. Indeed, it seems the better these work together, the more fashion film can sustain itself. As managing director of *Nowness* Daniel Coutinho recently noted, keeping online viewers connected for a length of time is a challenge: according to the company's audience engagement metrics (as of 2016), no more than 60 percent of the website visitors reportedly watch films to the end, and the average visit time is two and a half minutes (cited in Angileri, 2016).

The new creative economy that fuses advertising and editorial was satirized by *Nowness* in a 2018 mocumentary *Black*, written and directed by Isaac J Lock. Simultaneously, a love letter to and a merciless parody of the nuances of fashion, the film shows how a beauty shoot for a 'skincare brand' turns into a hilarious absurdity as the Creative Director (played by Lock himself) struggles to make his own vision compatible with the two clients' already conflicting briefs. As the final credits come up, the off-screen voice of the producer (Elena Saurel) explains to someone, presumably in a telephone conversation: 'No, it's not an ad . . . it's not sponsored content, it's editorial partnership. Partnership. With a brand. Yes. Correct. *Nowness* and the brand. But it's not sponsored, no. It's partnered.'

With the growing hegemony of online films commissioned by brands, it is unsurprising that fashion film is increasingly being cast as a straightforward marketing device. While in the vernacular it is largely taken for advertising that masquerades as art or entertainment, the industry's rhetoric around it has been dominated by softer terms such as 'brand narrative', 'brand experience' or 'branded entertainment'. This has then been echoed in academic writing. For, here too, fashion film has primarily been framed in the context of branding (see, for example, Diaz Soloaga and Garcia Guerrero, 2016; Mijovic, 2013; Rees-Roberts, 2018). Scholars have traced a variety of brand approaches to deploying film, investigating how film is used differently from other media to produce messages. They have also shown how brands have harnessed fashion film alongside print campaigns, movies and social media to present

a unified strategy. In doing so, they have provided invaluable insights into the commercial and symbolic nature of a great many fashion films. Their unquestioned emphasis on the brand, however, threatens to obscure the true complexity of fashion film as a phenomenon, as well as alternative readings of it. In fact, at times it seems that the term 'branded content' may swallow up fashion film wholesale.

At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, fashion film has come under criticism for its lack of content and narrative substance – in other words, for its 'attractional' aesthetic. Fashion film's alleged crime is its resembling moving fashion photographs and look books rather than real films. In that spirit, the photography curator and critic Charlotte Cotton (2014: 49) wrote that, apart from films made by 'actual filmmakers', fashion film – an 'overstretched term' – referred to:

> either a) B-roll footage of the 'behind-the-scenes' of a fashion shoot, edited to suggest that its atmosphere is one of constant action . . . or b) films made by fashion photographers' assistants using a locked-off shot showing models doing something slightly goofy or durational with a banging sound track.

And, similarly, *Nowness*'s commissioning director Raven Smith invoked fashion film as 'that tired, slow motion vision of a pretty girl in a pretty dress', declaring his own aim to change that perception: 'I'm obsessive about reducing superfluous vanity shots in each film and making sure we're telling a unified story throughout every moment' (Chitrakorn, 2016). While not entirely unjustified, these condemnations nevertheless imply that early 21st-century fashion film lacks sophistication and must therefore be superseded by a new generation of films that are more tightly structured and introduce more conventional cinematic idioms. In doing so, they implicitly impose a normative framework for viewing fashion film, while suggesting (among other things) that portraying a feeling or a mood is not enough and that an absence of storytelling is an issue to address.

Here, I argue that the increasingly dominant rhetoric of both branding and content threatens to overlook other, parallel needs that fashion films fulfil, while also marginalizing those fashion films that are wholly differently motivated. With that in mind, I ask: Could the media archaeological perspective help decentre this current focus? Could it help in restoring to fashion film its diversity – of interests and intentions, roles, expressions and possibilities? And finally, could it be that a rediscovery of forgotten aspects of fashion film from the early 20th century can productively inform our understanding of fashion film now? In what follows, I reflect on early fashion film of the silent era, outlining its diverse genres and multi-directional discourses. This unearthing of fashion film's complex cultural and technological layering,

then, is an attempt to provide a means of reframing the present phenomenon. My intention is not to argue that fashion film is an art form as opposed to a commercial device but, rather, to seek to rescue it – at least theoretically – from a one-sided view that risks distorting its true diversity and openness that accompanied it in its beginnings.

Thinking fashion film II: the past

Early 20th-century fashion films oscillated between several different registers – from news and information, to specialist knowledge and instruction, to advertising and promotion, to wonder and diversion. This looseness of purpose was in accordance with wider debates about cinema's application in areas beyond leisure and amusement, including education, science, current affairs, industry, commerce and art (Guido, 2007; Kessler and Eef, 2009: 76–78; also see *Le Cinéopse*, 1924: 91–92). Fashion film did not readily slot into any one established genre or category. Indeed, in film catalogues published by the likes of Gaumont, Pathé Frères, and Rex Motion Picture Company, fashion films were listed under different headings, from general interest (*scènes diverses*) and genre (*scènes de genre*) to actuality/topical (*scènes d'actualité*), to industry and craft (*scènes d'industrie* or *art et industrie*). In contrast, other genres that often centred around dress had more distinct identities and typically figured clothing as costume or props (albeit often fashionable) rather than fashion. These included comic scenes (*Puzzled Bather and His Animated Clothes*, James Williamson, 1901; *Madam's Hat*, Gaumont, 1907), trick films (*A Butterfly's Transformations*, Gaston Velle, 1904), disrobing films (*A Victorian Lady in Her Boudoir*, 1896) and the serpentine dance (*Annabelle Serpentine Dance*, WKL Dickson and William Heise, 1894).

Among the earliest examples of preserved films that can be construed as fashion films are actualities and moving portraits, in which the display of current fashions constitutes a defining element. For example, a trio of rare films from the archives of the Gramont family in France, dated between 1900–1904, show the aristocrat and socialite Countess Élisabeth Greffulhe in various social situations, including the wedding of her daughter Elaine in 1904, always presented in exquisite couture creations (Lewinsky, 2014). Being family films, they existed in a single print only. In contrast, contemporaneous commercial productions such as *Early Fashions on Brighton Pier* (attributed by the British Film Institute to James Williamson, 1898) and Gaumont's *A Beauty Show* (dated by Gaumont Pathé Archives at c.1900) would have been publicly distributed in multiple copies. The first is a single-shot actuality scene of a fashionably dressed crowd walking diagonally across the frame, from top right to bottom left (with a few figures walking in the opposite direction). Reminiscent of the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (1895), though shot at closer range, the film shows the strollers constantly moving forward, in a flux, mostly acknowledging the camera (with the children more obviously

gawking or spontaneously gesturing at it). In the second film, the performers are fully staged and controlled. The film frames the heads and torsos of six 'queens of Paris', posing on the central axis of the composition, against a dark curtain. They move their heads from side to side to showcase a variety of hats and hair adornments (a beauty queen crown, a bejewelled tiara) while every so often blowing kisses to the audience.

Such a conception of fashion film as an enacted presentation of diverse looks in a line-up came to define a popular subgenre emerging around 1905 at Pathé Frères and Gaumont in France, with titles including *Hairstyles and Adornments* (Gaston Velle, Pathé, 1905), *French Hairstyles* (Gaumont, 1906), *Costume through the Ages* (Pathé, 1907), *Breton Hairstyles* (Pathé, 1908), *Costume through the Ages Executed by Couturier Pascault* (Pathé, 1911), and *Parisian Fashion – Hairstyles at Decoux* (Pathé, 1911) (see Figure 1).[4] Some of these look at fashion through an ethnographic lens, showcasing a variety of styles characteristic of a specific geographical area, while others display fashion in a retrospective, 'through the ages' manner, where one historical epoch gives way to another, sometimes concluding with the present.[5] A recurrent motif in these films is that of bodies (or heads/torsos) repeatedly revolving on a mechanized turntable to afford a 360-degree view – a feature that meshes an older tradition of the fashion salon (Evans, 2013; Tolini Finamore, 2013: 77) with a cinematic suggestion of a continuous historical evolution executed through stop-motion trickery. Interestingly, this motif made a strong comeback in a number of 21st-century fashion films, including Marcus Tomlinson's *Aeroplane Dress* (1999), Nick Knight's *Sweet* (2000) and Lernert & Sander's *Fantastic Spins* series (2012). While showcasing the spectacular effects of 3-D scanning as well as fast and slow-motion, these films rediscover rotation as one of fashion's archetypal gestures (see Figure 2).

The early French films listed above would most likely be classified by today's archives as 'films of general interest' because of their non-specific approach to showcasing fashion and costume. Their primary purpose was to delight an audience with visually attractive imagery rather than publicizing particular fashion houses or manufacturers. Yet, from the beginning, they operate with the idea of a fashion-conscious audience, a notion that paves the way for the newsreel as a more crystallized form of fashion film. This identification of fashion as a subject is also evident in industrial-documentary films such as *Japan's Fan Industry* (André Legrand et Hache, 1906) and *Making Silk Hats* (Charles Urban Trading Co., 1911), which trace fashion production processes from raw material to the finished artefact. Some of the preserved films of this kind include color elements, as in Pathé's *Silk Industry in Japan* (1914), which concludes with a stencilled sequence demonstrating finished kimonos on live models (see Figures 3 and 4), or *The Making of Paper Hats in Japan* (1916), which is stencilled in its entirety. Compared with the studio-shot films, industrial films had the additional appeal of travel and ethnographic

Figure 1. *Parisian Fashion – Hairstyles at Decoux*, Pathé newsreel (1911). Reproduced courtesy of Gaumont-Pathé archives, collection Pathé.

Figure 2. *Fantastic Spins: The Upright Catch-foot Spin*, dir. Lernert & Sander for **Fantastic Man** magazine (2012). Reproduced courtesy of Lernert & Sander.

interest while also instructing audiences about the otherwise hidden skills of processing raw materials, and crafting or manufacturing them into marketable commodities. Even when such films publicized specific companies (*Cheveux*
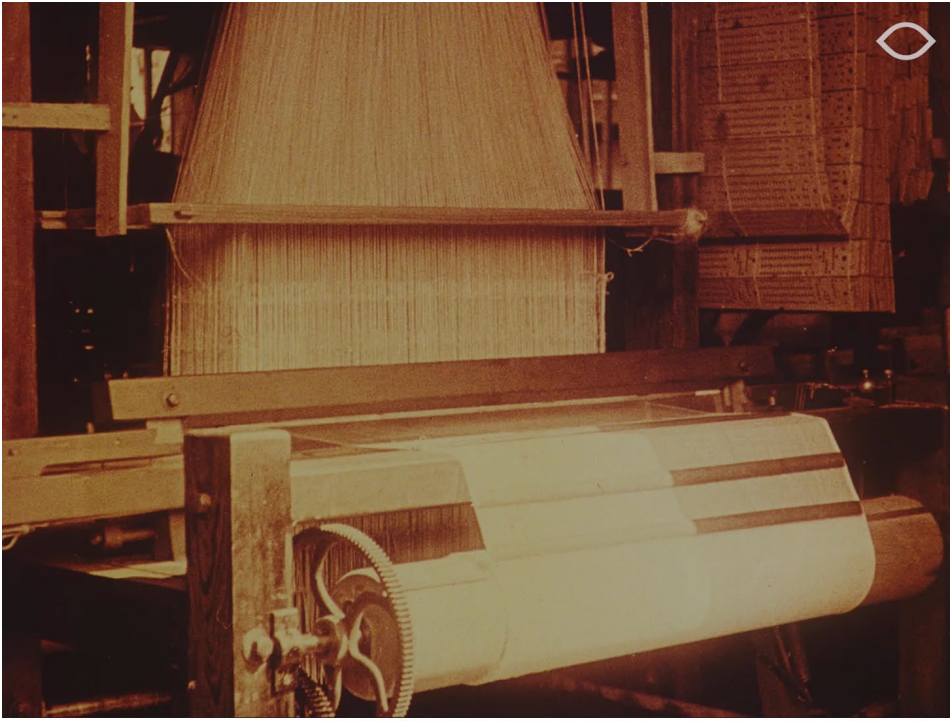
Figures 3 and 4. *Silk Industry in Japan*, Pathé newsreel (1914). Reproduced courtesy of Eye Film Museum, Amsterdam.

et chichi. Decoux, Pathé, 1911), they were generously praised by the press for their educational character. Again, these early films have their parallels in contemporary iterations of process and industrial films. Today, these are as likely to be commissioned by manufacturers themselves (as in Louis Vuitton's *What Is Savoir-Faire? The Art of Craftsmanship*, 2019) as by television and online media (as in CNN's *Inside Louis Vuitton's Success*, 2014).[6]

Advertising film evolved largely in overlaps with other genres, though it was always understood that its primary function was commercial publicity. There is a paucity of surviving archival films promoting fashion in the first decades of cinema (as well as press mentions of them),[7] even though advertising films were not uncommon. As is evident from lively debates in the trade press (see, for example, Rothacker, 1913: 46–48; Warrington, 1916: 231; and *The Bioscope*, 1916: 457), advertising was often presented in the guise of industrial films (as in the 1913 series *The Clothing Industry* promoting the Chicago-based menswear company Becker, Mayer & Co.), or mini-comedies that would entertain while simultaneously highlighting products in a favourable light. This was already the case with Georges Méliès's now-lost advertising films, all dating around 1900, which through trick scenes promoted commodities such as Mystère corsets, Delion hats or Éclipse shoe polish (Malthête, 1986; Malthête and Mannoni, 2008). One surviving example of an advertising fashion film is *Story of Warner's Fashionable Rust-proof Corsets, Guaranteed Not to Rust, Break or Tear* (Robert A Gibney, 1917), held at the Library of Congress in Washington. It begins with a comical situation of two mischievous children putting their mother's corset to all sorts of mutinous tests, followed by an animated product sequence at the end that closes with a finger pointing at the manufacturer's label. Another witty – and extremely charming – advertising film is *How to Captivate Your Husband?*, produced in 1926 for Dresden's fashion house Goldmann.[8] The plot involves a female client telephoning Goldmann's about a new wardrobe, and a group of miniaturized fashion mannequins dispatched from there down the telephone line to run to the client's living room and perform a fashion show there.

More often than not, advertising was a function of the newsreel, which became the most widespread type of early fashion film. As far as the newsreel was concerned, fashion became a regular instalment – and indeed ideal subject – because it uniquely combined newsworthiness, cross-cultural appeal and visual attractiveness. Beginning with *Pathé-Faits Divers* (later renamed *Pathé-Journal*) in 1908, the format of a package of short topical items quickly spread among numerous other film companies in France and beyond, including Gaumont, Éclair, Topical, Mutual, Universal and Messter. Throughout the silent period, fashion newsreels were shot in studios as well as on locations frequented by fashionable crowds, such as the Bois de Boulogne, and the racetracks at Auteuil and Longchamp. On the whole, they are rather formulaic in their staging (though often intoxicating to watch) and mobilize a limited repertoire of compositions and movements. Some show individual models performing for the camera in

a series of medium shots, pans and close-ups. But the vast majority present women in pairs or small groups, engaged in everyday social events such as arriving for a visit, conversing over tea, strolling and visiting a couturier, or showing off their clothes in the manner of a fashion show.

From the early 1910s, a great number of newsreels named, and thus directly promoted, the design houses, manufacturers and department stores they showcased, and this practice continued throughout the 1920s. The naming was done either directly, through the film titles, catalogue descriptions or intertitles, or indirectly, in the information provided to promotional bulletins and the press. The films feature many Parisian couturiers acclaimed in their day, though not always remembered today: alongside Lucile, Worth, Poiret, Paquin, Patou and Nicole Groult are Drecoll, Boué Soeurs, Jenny, Philippe & Gaston, Martial & Armand, Liette, Raudnitz, Melnotte-Simonin or Cora Marson, as well as myriad manufacturers of ready-to-wear, millinery, accessories, lingerie and jewellery. Thus, early fashion film tells an alternative kind of fashion history to that of scholarly and coffee table publications. It alerts us to those fashion houses that have been unremarked or forgotten by history – something that becomes especially affecting when they are resurrected in a cinematic projection. This, once again, resonates with digital fashion film, which has also often been a vehicle for smaller fashion labels (Mijovic, 2013) and this continues to be true in local contexts, especially where fashion industry funding and support structures are otherwise lacking (Afrosartorialism, 2018).

Not all fashion films, however, named individual fashion businesses – far from it. A great many omitted proper names in favour of general attributions to 'Parisian fashion', 'the masters of Parisian elegance' or 'our milliners' (*Pathé-Journal*, November–December 1912). In 1913, for example, the following titles circulated in the United States: *French Fashions: Latest Designs from the Land Where Modes Originate* (*Gaumont Weekly*); *Latest Importations from the Paris Millinery Shops* (*Animated Weekly*); *The Fashions in New York and Paris*; and *American Fashions* (both *Mutual Weekly*) (see *Moving Picture World*, 1913). As these examples demonstrate, fashion films have not always served brands as such but have, rather, fulfilled different needs, in this case fostering national economic and cultural interest (for more on this, see *Le film français*, 1924: 776 or *Ciné-Journal*, 1923: 5).

Perhaps the most common function of early fashion film was to offer women (the films almost exclusively addressed a female audience) practical advice on what to wear and how. This sartorial 'information' was inextricably linked to the knowledge of changing body ideals and hair styles, as well as ways of holding oneself, moving and gesturing. The newsreels emphasized the most up-to-date, 'correct' ways of presenting oneself, something that was not lost on contemporary commentators. For example, after a 1909 screening

at a Philadelphia department store of a film offering a 'glimpse of Paris, its cafes, race courses, and the fashionably clad women who frequent them', a journalist declared that 'American womanhood was shown the very latest toilettes affected by the monde of Paris, and the inimitable pose and savoir fare with which they wear their beautiful gowns' (*The Bioscope*, 1909: 23). The cinema, another commentator suggested, was uniquely adept at preserving such ephemeral know-how for future generations:

> in soft and sober poses, with imperial gestures [shapely models] present the creations of our great couturiers and furriers. These attitudes, these movements, these gestures, which change at the whim of fancies, will remain, will become dated, will be associated with a definite time. The cinema, with its divine power of resurrection, will later show us, as a whole, these gestural frivolities. (*Film-Revue*, 22 December 1913)

Early fashion films, though primarily products of the film industry, were deeply rooted in fashion's institutions and conventions, which provided audiences with an important frame of reference. Films not only represented the fashion show, the couture salon, the magazine and the photograph, but they also mimicked them in their very formats and structure. During the 1920s, fashion magazines and photographs became a recurrent reference for newsreel items created by the Studio G.L. Manuel Frères (see, for example, Pathé's *La Mode*, 1925; or Gaumont's *La Mode*, 1927, and *La Mode à Paris*, 1928). The films open with a shot of a magazine cover bearing the title *Sélection: Revue mensuelle*. A disembodied hand proceeds to open it to reveal a double-page spread of illustrations headed *Sélection modèles de haute couture*. There follows a succession of shots posited as 'animated photographs' of models in remarkably static poses, framed, picture-like, within circular, oval or rectangular vignettes surrounded by decorative patterns, metropolitan scenes, or black screens.

Newsreels were presented as newspapers in motion, and dedicated cinemagazines soon followed. For example, *The Fashion Review*, produced by Rex in 1912 in a substantial length of 555 feet, was planned as a quarterly periodical, though it was in the end released in a single issue only. A year later, the British fashion journalist Abby Meehan produced and presented *Kinemacolor Fashion Gazette* for Charles Urban's Natural Colour Kinematograph Company. The magazine featured London's socialites, beauties and stage actresses sporting latest fashions filmed in the two-colour process. Like *Fashion Review*, the magazine promised to keep up with fashion's seasons through quarterly instalments (Ariel, 1913: 33) but was similarly short-lived.

The *Gazette*'s intermedial relation with fashion was nevertheless pushed beyond the idea of the magazine when one of its screenings at a London West End Cinema was accompanied by a live fashion show (McKernan, 2009). While all kinds of fashion films have been regarded as fashion shows transposed

on film (Tolini Finamore, 2013), some of them also explicitly featured fashion shows – though it is difficult to establish to what extent they were staged specifically for the film camera. They were filmed either in couture salons (and at times showing clients and audiences, as in *At the great couturier*'s, filmed at Doucet's Paris showroom in 1923) or outdoors, in parks and gardens (as in Pathé-Journal's *Fashion Show* at St Louis, 1924) or makeshift settings. Already in 1911, Paul Poiret is reported to have filmed mannequins parading in his garden (Evans, 2011: 120), which he then used in a multi-media soirée in Munich's Four Seasons Hotel (*Comoedia*, 1911: 4) that combined the film screening with a talk and, again, a live fashion show. In the same year, a fashion show staged in Kensington was filmed using the Kinemacolor system (*The Moving Picture News*, 1911: 28), which Poiret himself gravitated towards (Tolini Finamore, 2013: 84–85).

Early cinema scholars have highlighted how, at the turn of the 20th century, the novelties of motion and colour constituted two pivotal 'wonders' that thrilled and enchanted audiences (Gunning, 1989a; Hanssen, 2006). The popularity of early fashion film is equally unthinkable without its ability to cast a spell. The sight of exquisitely dressed bodies on the screen reportedly beguiled film viewers. As Tolini Finamore (2013: 74) notes, one journalist was even inspired to attach to on-screen fashion mannequins the enigmatic label 'goddesses from the machine'. Early journalistic discourses on fashion film often linked the beauty of dress and accessories to the richness and charm of their film colours. But this relationship between fashion and colour was not a one-way street. While colour's power to enhance the experience of fashion on screen is indisputable, fashion, in turn, became colour's pre-eminent showcase (Hanssen, 2009; *The Moving Picture News*, 1913: 11; Snoyman, 2018) – so much so that fashion films occasionally doubled up as colour tests. This seems especially pertinent given that colour innovation and development became a competitive exercise, with a staggering range of technologies available on the market in the first four decades of cinema: from the post-production *coloriage* techniques of hand-colouring, tinting, toning and stencilling, to the photographic processes including Kinemacolor, Gaumont's Chronochrome, Lumière's Autochrome, Keller-Dorian, Kodachrome and eventually Technicolor.

Thinking fashion film III: past and present

Any attempt to answer the question 'What is fashion film?' runs the double-edged risk of prematurely circumscribing the field or, on the contrary, opening it up to sheer boundlessness. The recent scholarly focus on branding has, I believe, done the former while here I veer towards the latter. My point is this: the rise of digital fashion film, and the new conditions of the digital turn more generally, have inspired an archival exhumation of all manner of fashion film heritage, which calls for a new historical analysis. In turn, once brought

to light, this archival material almost inevitably challenges the existing knowledge of our own media present. In the words of Thomas Elsaesser (2016: 67), it offers a 'tool of resistance' against the existing paradigm.

Seen in parallel, fashion film of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries can teach us some important lessons. Firstly, the juxtaposition reveals fashion film to be a fundamentally diverse form that has, in two distinct historical periods, responded to a whole gamut of industrial demands, technological innovations and creative opportunities. Secondly, it spotlights two technological beginnings, in which fashion-as-moving image was faced with a seemingly infinite possibility of what it could be, before it was progressively institutionalized. Thirdly, and no less importantly, it also alerts us to moments of suppression and closure; moments when forms, practices and technologies became unfit for purpose, obsolete and passé. Such closures, as Giorgio Agamben (cited in Elsaesser, 2016: 67) suggests, can be seen as new openings:

> Precisely when something has outlived its usefulness can it be really current and urgent, because only then does it appear in its plenitude and truth . . . I understand the past as something that is still to come and that needs to be wrested from the dominant idea of history, so that it can take place.

In the context of digital fashion film's brief history in the 21st century, it is illuminating to recall that many fashion designers, photographers and other practitioners reached for the moving image as a means of expressing their ideas and artistic processes. As Nick Knight remarked, '[there] were certain things that I believed in when we started SHOWstudio. One was process, the second was performance and the third was moving fashion' (O'Neill, 2008; see also Beard, 2008: 182). Indeed, SHOWstudio's original intention was to establish a freely accessible, unfiltered creative outlet that would bypass the usual commercial pressures of the fashion and publishing industries. The guiding principles of the early years were to showcase the normally unseen, temporal aspects of fashion design and image making, and to investigate the visual and communication possibilities of the digital. Thus, SHOWstudio began by going against the grain of standardized industry practices and, in fact, by putting up resistance vis-à-vis the status quo. And there are of course other instances, including recent ones, of a more purely experimental ethos seeking to open up new avenues for fashion imaging. For example, Barnaby Roper's oneiric film *The Dress* (2016), made in collaboration with designer Iris van Herpen, used CGI, compositing and other post-production and special effects techniques to reimagine Van Herpen's sculptural designs as perpetually transforming organic structures and textures (see Figure 5).

The issue here, though, is not merely one of art versus commerce (after all, fashion is business). It is also one of context, intention and purpose. The diversity

Figure 5. *The Dress*, dir. Barnaby Roper, in collaboration with Iris van Herpen (2016). Reproduced courtesy of Barnaby Roper/Cadence.

of early fashion film's functions encourages us to take into account current fashion films that feature brands but not in the sense of direct promotion. These films may pay homage to iconic fashion and sportswear labels, but they are themselves independently produced. Rather than promotion, their goal is to capture some form of unique style and to show clothing as a means of self-expression (see, for example, Sizwe Mbiza's *Gug' Othandayo – A Tribute to the Air Max*, 2018, Figure 6). In addition to the creative output, there is also a large volume of editorial moving image content presented across websites, YouTube channels and social media. Much of it is made up of fashion show videos, backstage and 'behind-the-scenes' footage, make-up and how-to-dress tutorials, vlogs, interviews, reportage and travelogues, as well as series such as 'inside the wardrobe'. These are not valued in artistic (filmic) terms but rather for the information they convey.[9] Yet they are watched avidly and therefore constitute a part of fashion's visual culture that cannot be ignored.

Finally, placing fashion film within the context of contemporary branding not only leads to overlooking certain bodies of film, but it also gestures towards impoverishing interpretation. There are some lines of enquiry that tend to be downplayed – above all to do with aesthetic and technical aspects; cultural studies' concerns with the changing attitudes towards representing bodies; the films' fundamentally collaborative nature and collective authorship that, though familiar within fashion photography, differ from traditional models of film production; and, last but not least, the exposure afforded to lesser-known design labels, women filmmakers and fashion creatives operating outside Western Europe and North America.[10] If branding has become the dominant

Figure 6. *Gug' Othandayo – A Tribute to the Air Max*, dir. Sizwe Mbiza (2018). Reproduced courtesy of Folktale Johannesburg PTY, Ltd.

framework for understanding fashion film, it is now vital to search for other, alternative conceptions. And it is my contention that a media–archaeological dig into the layers of fashion film history can prove instrumental in defamiliarizing the increasingly uniform discourses of contemporary fashion film.

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Notes

1. I borrow the concepts of 'diagnosis' and 'excavation' from Michel Foucault (1994[1967]) who saw them as interrelated, arguing that it is not only the past but also the present that needs excavating: 'Je cherche à diagnostiquer, à réaliser un diagnostic du present, à dire ce que nous sommes aujourd'hui . . . Ce travail d'excavation sous nos pieds . . .' (I seek to diagnose, to undertake a diagnosis of the present, to say what we are today . . . This work of excavation under our feet . . .).
2. Gunning (1989b) originally coined this term primarily with reference to early cinema until c. 1907. The concept was later applied to other cinematic and 'post-cinematic' forms. For its application to fashion film, see Evans (2011, 2013), Ganeva (2008), Hanssen (2009) and Uhlirova (2013b).
3. The predictions of the current growth of video traffic online are startling. According to Cisco visual networking index, by 2022, video will constitute 82 percent of all business and consumer web traffic. Global online video traffic will have grown four-fold from 2017 to 2022. See: https://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/collateral/service-provider/visual-networking-index-vni/white-paper-c11-741490.html
4. For more on these and other titles, see Gaumont Pathé Archives, the 'filmographie' section of the Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé (http://www.fondation-jeromeseydoux-pathe.com) and Gaumont catalogues from 1906 and 1909.
5. This animated history book format has a striking parallel in the online series '100 Years of [Fashion, Beauty, Shoes, Exercise etc.]', produced since 2015 by popular women's magazines such as *Glam Inc.*, *Glamour* and *Allure* and watched on YouTube by millions. I thank Charlotte Brachtendorf for this observation.
6. A distinct group among these are documentary exposés of the human and environmental abuses within fashion manufacture, many of which are feature-length (see Micha X Peled's *China Blue*, 2005; Andrew Morgan's *The True Cost*, 2015; and Rahul Jain's *Machines*, 2016, among many others).
7. Though see, for example, *The Bioscope* (1909: 23, 1912: 283).
8. The film is held in Berlin's Bundesarchiv under the title *Wie fessele ich meinen Mann?*
9. Note in this context the systematic separation in the industry's usage of the terms 'film' (denoting creative and aspirational productions) and 'video' (denoting the various journalistic formats). In the digital era, such a differentiation is, for the most part, no longer linked to the material base used. Rather, it serves to evoke distinct traditions (cinema, music video), while also implying more or less culturally substantial expressions.
10. It is worth noting that submissions to festivals such as the Paris-based ASVOFF, Milan's

Fashion Film Festival and Cape Town's Bokeh South Africa International Fashion Film Festival have been truly global for a number of years now (see, for example, Anaya, 2013). Between 2018 and 2019, the winners in the festivals' various categories hailed from countries including Thailand, Taiwan, Iran, Poland, Kenya and Russia. Non-Western fashion films can also be freely easily accessed on a number of websites such as africa.film, and YouTube channels such as *Vogue China*.

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