

Unfolding Fashion's Fictions: Fashion Film and the Narrative Possibilities of Dress

Author

Berry, Jess

Published

2013

Journal Title

Catwalk: The Journal of Fashion, Beauty and Style

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

Rights statement

© 2013 Inter-Disciplinary Press. The attached file is reproduced here in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher. Please refer to the journal's website for access to the definitive, published version.

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/59848>

Link to published version

<https://www.inter-disciplinary.net/publishing/aboutus/>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

Unfolding Fashion's Fictions: Fashion Film and the Narrative Possibilities of Dress

Jess Berry

Fashion advertisements and editorials have developed compelling stories of romance, mystery and glamour around clothing, which highlights the importance of narrative in the representation of dress. In the quest for an ever-more spectacular fashion image, the primacy of fashion photography in mediating that image has recently been challenged by the phenomenon of the short fashion film. This new commercial medium has persuasively extended the narrative possibilities of dress through cinematic convention and self-reflexive referencing. This paper considers and analyses several examples of the short fashion film to argue that two distinct formats have emerged within this burgeoning genre. In what I term 'fashion as character' exclusive fashion brands employ big budgets, renowned directors and glamorous celebrities to create extended advertisements that cast the fashion object as a central protagonist. In 'fashion as action' open-ended scenarios are positioned as a form of artistic cultural activity, employing avant-garde film-making techniques to convey the fashion object as the unfolding drama.

Specifically, this paper will argue that short fashion films employ two vastly different narrative structures that position the viewer as either a passive reader or an active author. The 'fashion as character' film's constrictive format fuels the reader's consumptive desire in the quest for identity construction, while the enigmatic narrative of the 'fashion as action' film allows for the spectator's authorial engagement and masquerade. In articulating this distinction, the paper will compare these differing narrative structures to that of the photographic fashion magazine editorial in order to elucidate how the moving image has changed the way the spectator experiences fashion.

Key Words

Fashion, photography, film, narrative.

Introduction

Increasingly, fashion exists through its representation in narrative form. In particular, Roland Barthes seminal text, *The Fashion System*, articulated the network of meaning that occurs between the fashion object, image, text and reader. In emphasising the role of 'written' clothing in the fashion narrative process, Barthes established that the photographic image translated into language, was able to transform dress into fashion, where 'written' clothing unlike 'real' or 'image' clothing has no practical or aesthetic function, operating purely on a semiotic level to convey meaning.ⁱ For Barthes, 'written' clothing is able to translate details that fashion photography cannot, opening out for the reader the invisible aspects of the image. Specifically, he claims, 'it endows the garment with a system of functional oppositions (for example fantasy/classic) which the real or photographed garment is not able to manifest in as a clear manner'.ⁱⁱ

While text continues to play an important role in the representational discourse of contemporary fashion, it has become increasingly evident that visual language is equally convincing in providing clothing with narrative structure and content. As fashion theorist Patrizia Calefato explains,

The clothed body is thus a body whose openings, confusion of signs and intersections of discourse assume a profound value. One need only think of the cross-textural strategies that fashion...exploits: photography, cinema, literature, figurative art, and urban culture are all endless sources of images upon which fashion draws, and which in turn, are themselves inspired and nourished by fashion.ⁱⁱⁱ

Over the course of the twentieth century fashion photography became the primary purveyor of fashion narrative to the extent where the fashion image has become as culturally significant as the fashion object itself. Compelling stories of romance, drama, mystery and suspense have been constructed around clothing, providing the fashion object with its mythic and symbolic quotient. Photographic fashion narrative has been present in magazine editorials and advertising since the 1920s and 30s,^{iv} however, as Susan Kismaric and Eva Respini claim, one of the most significant changes to occur in fashion photography since the 1990s has been that clothing 'has become subordinate to the photographic depiction of lifestyle: transformed from a frozen object of beauty to a tantalizing aspect of narrative'.^v Fashion photographers and stylists have constructed serial images that employ ambient lighting, sets and props, casting garments as secondary characters to stories of eroticism, death and psychological tension.

More recently, the dominance of fashion photography's mediation of the fashion image has been challenged by the phenomenon of the short fashion film. Given that the narrative turn in fashion photography has created persuasive and desirable fashion scenarios, it is unsurprising that the glamour and melodrama of the cinema has been adopted by the fashion industry as a marketing method. As Calefato suggests,

The cinema in particular, constitutes one of the most complete and multifarious universes of social imagery, and has a more important role in relation to fashion than photography, because of its ability to empower sensibility through the complexity of signs, discourses and modes of perception that bring it into play.^{vi}

Film and the fashion system have always shared a symbiotic relationship of commercial and cultural influence: historian Adrienne Munich argues that, 'from the earliest film era, Fashion appreciated its affinity with film as a means to enhance its visibility. This affinity extended beyond aesthetics to encompass a connection between mutually advantageous industries'.^{vii} These relationships are many and varied, and include the role of the couturier as costume designer (e.g., Jean Paul Gaultier, Coco Chanel), the prevalence of fashion in so-called 'boutique flicks' (e.g., *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Sex and the City*)^{viii} and the impact of the celebrity red-carpet catwalk.

In the last decade, luxury fashion labels have increasingly emphasised the connections between fashion and film by employing acclaimed film directors to develop extended advertisements for their products. Through cinematic convention and self-reflexive referencing, these short films create further cultural cache for the fashion object. As fashion reporter Suzy Menkes argues, short fashion films 'have become the hottest new fashion accessory — a way to bring emotion and visual excitement to branding for the YouTube generation'.^{ix} In particular, online video has transformed how fashion is mediated, with short fashion films distributed through new digital channels, brand websites, and online fashion magazines. These new formats have made moving fashion increasingly popular and accessible to a global audience. The aesthetic possibilities of this new media phenomenon has led many designers to experiment with more esoteric forms of filmic narrative that are less clearly branded content and instead a contemplation of the flow of fashion as a moving image. As photographer and short fashion film-maker, Nick Knight argues:

When a designer produces a piece of clothing it is to be seen in movement...designers have had to accept that's not how their clothes would be seen...fashion has almost solely been represented by the still image...with the advent of the internet, the garment can now be shown in the way it was intended.^x

This paper analyses several examples of the short fashion film to argue that two distinct formats that have emerged within this burgeoning genre. In what I term 'fashion as character', exclusive fashion brands employ big budgets, renowned directors and glamorous celebrities to create extended advertisements that cast the fashion object as a central protagonist. In 'fashion as action', open-ended scenarios are positioned as a form of artistic cultural activity, employing avant-garde film-making techniques to convey the fashion object as the unfolding drama.

Specifically, this paper will contend that short fashion films employ two vastly different narrative devices that position the viewer as either a passive reader or an active author. The 'fashion as character' film's constrictive format fuels the reader's consumptive desire of the reader in the quest for identity construction, while the enigmatic narrative of the 'fashion as action' film allows for the spectator's authorial engagement and masquerade. In articulating this distinction, the paper will compare these differing narrative structures to that of the photographic fashion magazine editorial in order to elucidate how the moving image has changed the way the spectator experiences fashion.

The Short Fashion Film: 'Fashion as Character'

Chanel's first fragrance film, *Share the Fantasy*,^{xi} directed by Ridley Scott in 1979 has proven to be a catalyst for the future of fashion advertising, whereby famous directors, including Baz Luhrmann, Martin Scorsese and Sophia Coppola, have created branded content for exclusive fashion houses that operate as entertainment. While early examples of the genre were designed for cinema advertisement and television broadcast, increasingly, brands such as Chanel, Dior, Prada and Gucci have exploited the 'clip culture' of online communities to distribute catwalk shows and short-films.^{xii} As Susie Khamis and Alex Munt argue, 'the *auteurs* of modern cinema [have been enlisted] to create films that don't just sell scent, but tell a story—branding as narrative, not merely allusion'.^{xiii}

The consumer's cinematic literacy is significant to the advertisement's reception as a cultural product. For example, *No. 5 the Film*,^{xiv} directed by Baz Luhrmann for Chanel in 2004 made specific reference to Luhrmann's feature film, *Moulin Rouge* through the casting of Nicole Kidman as the central character in a love story between a celebrity and an unknown writer. Similarly, the *Lady Dior* series of four films starring Marion Cotillard and a collection of Dior handbags each employs big-name directors, Olivier Dahan, Johans Akerland, David Lynch and John Cameron Mitchell, along with their individual cinematic lexicons. For example, Lynch's sixteen-minute *Lady Blue Shanghai*^{xv} features a number of the director's leitmotifs—an obscure storyline, flashing lights, flashbacks, a blue rose and haunting music.

In commissioning Lynch to make the film, Dior attempts to merge art and commerce, providing the luxury brand with cultural cache by associating the label with the vision of an avant-garde director. Yet, I would argue that while the film is not an obvious advertisement it still fails to obscure its commercial imperative. The bag's entrance is a spectacular one, literally appearing in a flash of light and puff of smoke. This rather tawdry device acts as a parody of Lynch's previous work and so his oeuvre is cast as a commodity in the same mode as the Dior handbag. The branded product becomes a central character that undergoes a transformation from a source of anxiety to a fetish object that replaces Cotillard's love interest.

While Lynch's film and others like it bring the commercial closer to art, they fail to transcend the demarcation between the two. I contend that this is because of the inherent temporal structure of the medium and linear nature of the narratives that the 'fashion as character' film employs. The Dior series of films, and other similar advertisements, leave little space for the reader's authorship of the narrative. As Christian Metz suggests, the timing of the cinematic lexis is determined by the filmmaker, as opposed to the photographic lexis, which has no fixed duration, and so it is the spectator who is the master of the

look.^{xvi} In the case of serial fashion photography, the relationship between images allows the reader to both complete and elude the narrative. The sequencing of photographs in magazine editorials refers to both a past actuality and possible future lives into which the author can project themselves, and so masquerade as different identities. This process is described by Ulrich Lehman thus:

The photographer takes the sequential progression of narrative film images and pries them apart...and thereby leaves huge gaps between syntactically unconnected pictures, that require the spectator to...create the storyline.^{xvii}

Thus, while a given editorial might suggest a temporal flow in time through sequencing, in the case of serial fashion photography, the mental spatial framework that exists between images encourages the reader's authorial engagement, and so they play a part in the construction of fashion. Where the magazine editorial requires the spectator to implicate themselves in the story's completion, the 'fashion as character' film has a self-regulating structure that maintains and closes itself, where the drive of the film offers beginning, middle and end, and character, dilemma and solution without the reader necessarily involving themselves in the scenario. I propose that with this type of fashion film, the resonance of the fashion object appears to the reader as a constructed commercial product rather than a prop that provokes an internalised fantasy. Despite the seductiveness of the fashion film's glamorized surface, it fails to conceal the world of consumption that drives it, instead inviting the spectator to revel in it.

The Short Fashion Film: 'Fashion as Action'

While many fashion films are problematic in disguising their advertising purposes, they nevertheless do offer something that still photography cannot: the possibility for clothing to be alive and moving on the body. Film has the ability to animate fashion: it echoes fashion's transience while photography can only capture it. Peter Wollen describes this metaphoric difference whereby 'film is like fire, photography is like ice. Film is all light and shadow, incessant motion, transience, flicker... Photography is motionless and frozen, it has the cryogenic power to preserve objects through time without decay'.^{xviii} As Metz suggests, the 'immobility and stillness of photography lends it authority', yet these same characteristics also render the medium deathly.^{xix} That fashion is never static indicates the suitability of film as a medium to mediate fashion as a constantly changing image. How, then, can the flow of fashion be captured while also considering its narrative potential in a way that is neither constrictive nor definitive?

I propose that an alternate space for fashion narrative has emerged in the convergence of still and moving images in Nick Knight's Showstudio.com. The films and interactive projects featured on this website offer hybrid images that engage with methods appropriate to serial photographic narrative while adopting filmic techniques such as slow motion and montage editing. As Knight explains, 'a piece of film is a sequential event and therefore a narrative starts to impose itself more quickly... what I'm asking people to do is express fashion in movement: its subtly different from asking someone to make a film'.^{xx}

For example, Knight's film *Cygnets*^{xxi} vacillates between filmic motion and photographic still. Through liquid-like dissolves the film highlights the shifting dance of the model's poses and the fluid movement of fabric. Feathers and chiffon behave like brushstrokes on a black canvas background: clothing traverses over the body seeking out its peaks and inclines--a landscape that is unfixed and constantly changing. Champagne tulle creates a shimmering aurora of texture and tone. Rather than a character or prop of previous photographic or filmic narratives, fashion *is* the unfolding action- an abstract painting in cloth. The story develops through the tactile quality of the garments that suggest a slowly unfolding beauty of mood, tone and texture. While this might be an obscure and untethered fiction for the reader to engage with, its enigma is such that the viewer is able to fabricate their own fantasy between the montage of images. As Margaret Maynard argues, 'imprecise narratives with formal aesthetic qualities, the wow factor of the look, its setting and no-plot story, create a powerful effect, drawing the viewer into the scenario'.^{xxii}

I argue that this film might be considered more closely related to art rather than advertising—and thus more successfully obscure its commercial purpose—because its narrative structure is more closely aligned with the fashion magazine editorial. As such, it provokes authorial engagement as opposed to the cinematic form that aims for narrative immersion. This is exemplified by Knight's framing, which pays tribute to the double-page-spread magazine layout, but perhaps more particularly, in the performance of gestures and postures undertaken by the model, which is reminiscent of a photo-shoot. In this film, the model's body is constantly in motion, yet its action is punctuated by stillness evocative of the photograph. The immobility of the model in the fashion photograph means that she is momentarily fixed in order to display details of the garment. In the case of Knight's fashion film, I would suggest that the momentary frozen gesture offers the reader a space within the film's temporal framework to insert themselves, and author their own fashion narrative of identity masquerade. This fashion narrative is not so much about the false desire of the commodity form, but rather how the arresting flow of moving fabric can offer an experience of embodying fashion to the reader.

Conclusion

The short fashion film has been adopted by the fashion industry as a new advertising medium. Many of these films, especially those created as advertisements for luxury brands, rely on a closed self-regulating structure that I would suggest circumvents the viewer's engagement in the narrative and so highlights the commercial intent of the medium. The hybrid fashion

film/photograph project differs to these previous narrative forms in that the space for authorial construction occurs in the fleeting instances between the model's poses, in the unfolding action of texture and form and in the moments when the fluttering of garments resides. Perhaps then such forms help viewers to see that fashion exists not only through clothing's representation *in* narrative but through the performance of fashion *as* narrative in and of itself.

In recasting fashion as the narrative of his films, Knight highlights how more obviously commercial campaigns, such as Dior's *Lady Blue Shanghai*, attempt to obfuscate the commodity in spectacle. While Showstudio projects such as *Cygnets* still engage with the spectacle of veiling fashion in seductive dream-worlds, the movement and flow of fashion suggests to the reader an experience of wearing and embodying fashion that is made more tangible. Perhaps then, what one sees in Knight's hybrid still and moving images is Barthes' 'image' clothing and 'real' clothing colliding, where the experience of wearing the physical garment, its texture, its details, its gathers, folds and pleats are conveyed to the reader through its moving image.

iNotes

Barthes, R. 1991, *The Fashion System*, trans. M. Ward & R. Howard, University of California Press, Berkley, p.8.

ii *ibid.*, p.14.

iii Calefato, P. 1997, 'Fashion and Worldliness: Language and imagery of the Clothed Body', *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 1, Iss.1, p.71.

iv Maynard, M. 2009, 'The Mystery of the Fashion Photograph', *Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film and Television*, P. McNeil, V. Karaminas & C. Cole (eds.), Berg, Oxford, p.66.

v Kismaric, S & Respini, E. 2008, 'Fashion Fiction in Photography since 1990', *Fashion as Photograph*, E. Shinkle (ed.), I.B Tauris, London, p.30.

vi Calefato, *op. cit.*, p.71.

vii Munich, A 2011, 'Filming Fashion', *Fashion in Film*, A. Munich, (ed.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, p.107.

viii Warner, H 2012, 'Tracing Patterns: Critical approaches to on screen fashion'. *Film, Fashion and Consumption*, Vol.1, No.1, p.122.

ix Menkes, S. 2010, 'Fashion Films become the hottest new accessories: From Chanel to Dior, houses are getting in on branding revolution', *International Herald Tribune*, 18 May, retrieved June 20, 2012
<<http://search.proquest.com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/docview/288078479>>

x Showstudio, 'Nick Knight on Moving Fashion', 2005, retrieved June 15 2012,
http://showstudio.com/project/moving_fashion#interview_transcript

xi See Ridley Scott, 1979 *Share the Fantasy*, retrieved June 15 2012 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dx3Na_7inPI>

xii Khamis, S & Munt, A. 2010, 'The Three Cs of Fashion Media Today: Convergence, Creativity & Control', *Scan Journal of Media Arts Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 2, November, retrieved 25 July 2011,
<http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/print.php?journal_id=155&j_id=20>

xiii *ibid.*, <http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/print.php?journal_id=155&j_id=20>

xiv See David Lynch 2010, *Lady Dior Shanghai*, retrieved June 15 2012 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfoMbir_Qd4>

xv See Nick Knight, March 25, 2011, *Cygnets*, Showstudio, retrieved June 20, 2012,
http://showstudio.com/project/ming_xi_couture_2011

xvi Metz, C 1990, 'Photography and Fetish', *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, C. Squires (ed), Bay Press, Seattle, p.155.

xvii Lehmann, U. 2002, 'Fashion Photography', *Chic Clicks: Creativity and Commerce in Contemporary Fashion Photography*, Institute of Contemporary Art Boston & Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, n.p.

xviii Wollen, P 2003, 'Fire and Ice', *The Photography Reader*; L. Wells (ed), Routledge, London, p.78.

xix Metz, C 1990, 'Photography and Fetish', *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, C. Squires (ed), Bay Press, Seattle, p.157.

xx 'Nick Knight on Moving Fashion', Showstudio, 2005, retrieved June 15 2012,
http://showstudio.com/project/moving_fashion#interview_transcript

xxi See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9_i9wRVbxY

xxii Maynard, op. cit., p.66.

Bibliography

- Barthes, R. 1991, *The Fashion System*, trans. M. Ward & R. Howard, University of California Press, Berkley.
- Calefato, P. 1997, 'Fashion and Worldliness: Language and imagery of the Clothed Body', *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 1, Iss.1, pp. 69-90.
- Khamis, S & Munt, A. 2010, 'The Three Cs of Fashion Media Today: Convergence, Creativity & Control', *Scan Journal of Media Arts Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 2, November, retrieved 25 July 2011,
<http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/print.php?journal_id=155&j_id=20>
- Kismaric, S & Respini, E. 2008, 'Fashion Fiction in Photography since 1990', *Fashion as Photograph*, E. Shinkle (ed.), I.B Tauris, London.
- Maynard, M. 2009, 'The Mystery of the Fashion Photograph', *Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film and Television*, P. McNeil, V. Karaminas & C. Cole (eds.), Berg, Oxford.
- Lehmann, U. 2002, 'Fashion Photography', *Chic Clicks: Creativity and Commerce in Contemporary Fashion Photography*, Institute of Contemporary Art Boston & Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit.
- Menkes, S. 2010, 'Fashion Films become the hottest new accessories: From Chanel to Dior, houses are getting in on branding revolution', *International Herald Tribune*, 18 May, retrieved June 20, 2012
<<http://search.proquest.com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/docview/288078479>>
- Metz, C 1990, 'Photography and Fetish', *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, C. Squires (ed), Bay Press, Seattle.
- Munich, A. 2011, 'Filming Fashion', *Fashion in Film*, A. Munich, (ed.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Showstudio, 'Nick Knight on Moving Fashion', 2005, retrieved June 15 2012,
http://showstudio.com/project/moving_fashion#interview_transcript
- Warner, H .2012, 'Tracing Patterns: Critical approaches to on screen fashion'. *Film, Fashion and Consumption*, Vol.1, No.1, pp.121-132.
- Wollen, P. 2003, 'Fire and Ice', *The Photography Reader*; L. Wells (ed), Routledge, London.