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Mariana Medeiros Seixas, Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb

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## **23 / Translating Cultural Values through the Aesthetics of the Fashion Film**

Mariana Medeiros Seixas &  
Frédéric Gimello Mesplomb

### **Film and Fashion in the Digital Era**

The recently emerging genre of the Fashion films, largely enabled by the digital revolution and developments in creative practice, typically finds an outlet in festivals and on online platforms. Such films can be described as hybrid, borrowing conventions from narrative film, art and abstract film, music video and brand content, and marked by an allusive eclecticism. Digital techniques, for example, have led to changes in film style and aesthetics, simplifying the business of manipulating the properties of the image and its combination with other images.

The rapid cutting originally associated with the work of the Russian montage school and later familiar from the early days of MTV, became widespread in blockbuster action movies<sup>1</sup>, requiring a different mode of viewing because of the dizzying speed at which shots were combined, and perhaps even a new cultural perspective in general: *“A hundred years after cinema’s birth cinematic ways of seeing the world, of structuring time, of narrating a story, of linking one experience to the next, have become the basic means by which computer users access and interact with all cultural data”*<sup>2</sup>.

With the rise of digital technologies, media aesthetics have gained new prominence and urgency. In this essay we analyse a number of fundamental and image elements, including aspects of two-dimensional space such as light and colour; three-dimensional elements such as time and motion; the contribution of sound; the context in which they are used; and, of ultimate significance, the cultural references and values that they represent.

### **Motion and Emotion**

In a crowded marketplace, brands and cultural institutions have had to adapt their offer to a fickle public. In this accelerated context, digital film-making has made plastic and temporal features of film such as duration and editing much easier to manipulate. In the case of YouTube advertising, for example, duration is an important feature because brands have to capture the attention of the audience in a fraction of second in order to be noticed. Fashion films, when used as advertising, follow this basic rule. Even if the majority of fashion films are not longer than three minutes (mostly non-narrative ones), some films will exceed this length, reaching a

running-time of as many as 15-20 minutes – effectively acquiring the status of mini-feature films.

*Secret Garden*, for example, a 2012 fashion film by Inez et Vinoodh for Dior, is made up of numerous fast shots, which are co-ordinated with high-pitched sounds. The spectator thus receives many images in a short period of time - which can induce a feeling of disorder, chaos, and immersion. Rapid cutting is indeed one of the major characteristics associated with the fashion film: according to our analysis, in fashion films shots have an average duration of five seconds, almost like those found in the music video. (The period of post-classical cinema, especially the early 1980s - which saw the rise of the 'MTV style', namely the fast cutting associated with the birth of the short-form music video - may well have seen changes in the narrative and editing style of cinema at large, which has arguably seen a progressive reduction in the typical average shot-length.)

Other effects like slow motion, accelerated motion and reverse motion are used in fashion films in order to intensify a moment, suggest drama, or to illustrate a different impression of time-space. A particular example of a fashion film using slow-motion technique that allows us to deconstruct a character and master its movements is *Jumper* by Justin Anderson for the brand Jonathan Saunders (2014). The film first utilises slow-motion when introducing the main character. He enters the lives of a family by means of slow movements in shots of average length. As soon as he is part of their routine, the shots quicken, expressing dynamism and also the disarray that he causes. Implicitly, it also deploys fast cutting in order to show the clothes ingeniously, keeping the composition of the shot but changing a single element - the

shirt worn by the character, which even if it is not the central subject of the film, allows the spectator to unconsciously apprehend it. The rhythm and the speed of images work in tandem with the background music as they accelerate in time with each other.

### **The Aesthetics of Synaesthesia**

The 'music video effect' is characterised by the narrative drive of the music, which has as a goal intensification of complex cognitive processes induced by image and sound. This can produce highly synesthetic moments in the sense that it can pause the narrative to send the spectator beyond it, provoking a variety of sensations. This proves to be one of the major communication strategies used in fashion films, as most films of this kind base their narrative on the synergy between sound and image.

The play with time boundaries allows for the 'suspension' of time and a feeling of 'gliding'. The spectator becomes immersed in a world which is both strange and yet familiar, for which s/he is not fully equipped and yet for which s/he has some of the basic entry requirements. Indeed, fashion films can be clearly compared to music videos except for two important details. Firstly, music in fashion films is adapted to the storytelling, not the other way round as is the case in the music video, where music guides the images.

Secondly, fashion films have an important institutional dimension borrowed from the cinema: unlike music videos (which take their names from the song they are showcasing), almost every fashion film presents a title and (again unlike the music video) the fashion film typically refers to its

creative origins through the very basic convention of an authorial and industrial credit-sequence.

As is the case with music, colour and lighting also have synaesthetic properties. The digital revolution, specifically digital colour grading, has introduced important improvements in the manipulation of these elements, making it possible to create a wide variety of visual effects involving new perceptual conditions for the spectator, and new states of mind for characters and audiences alike. The framing, lighting, and colour palette of a film were sometimes in the past referred to as a form of 'plastic rhythm', while the soundtrack and editing style were understood to be to do with 'temporal rhythm'. Through mastery of a complex color palette the director is able to challenge the long tradition of cinematic naturalism of which these dimensions were important aspects.

In our analysis of the chromatic values of fashion films we noticed a predominance of shades of green and blue and thus a dominance of what may be regarded as 'cool' colours, evoking a sedative effect of calm and equilibrium, and contributing to the characteristically oneiric mood of fashion films, with their frequently dreamy atmosphere, even sometimes one of nostalgia and melancholy. In *Lady Blue Shanghai*, a David Lynch fashion film for Dior (2010), the hues of blue are gloomy, adding a mystery to the plot (the same color palette is used in Dior's *Secret Garden*). In other words the audience is invited to escape from reality, thanks to the use of high-pitched music, fast cutting, and non-linear narrative creating a vulnerable state of mind where one can easily lose track of traditional time-space boundaries.

A new experience of space and time is also available through digital media's ability to collect together, re-combine, and re-distribute elements of cultural history, with the result that pastiche is one of the most significant features of digital cinema. Pastiche is a form of imitation which may mock or parody the original, but always by engaging the pleasure of knowing, of recognising cultural references and their return from history to a new existence in the current text. Pastiche, we might say, works as a spectatorship filter, an attempt to have a cognitive impact on a particular social group.

The fascination for cinematic pastiche is in turn reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him or her. Fashion films comprise mainly non-linear narratives and a great number of images, yet they deliberately touch only a narrow group of people. They may be little known to the mass audience, but their distribution through online video platforms make them available to a number of significant users.

### **Cultural Value**

'Film' and 'fashion' are major tools for the construction and dissemination of social and cultural value. The role of film is well-known to readers of this essay. Where fashion is concerned, costume can shape the identity of characters and also mirror a wider society, influencing in turn matters of consumption, taste, and style. The fashion film thus represents the conflation of two major social forces for the expression and shaping of identity across the generations of the group and of the individual, and across the wider institutions of the society at large.

Contemporary fashion films thus exhibit some of the major cultural values of the digital era. These values go far beyond the clothes which they are selling to consumers. They can also be understood, as we have argued in this essay, in terms of the formal and stylistic presentation of such objects within the particular semiotic forms associated with this new audiovisual genre. These values can be perceived, for example, in relation to changing notions of space and time, since these have gained a new meaning in the digital era, as well as in terms of new explorations of aesthetics.

More fundamentally, they also have deeper ideological underpinnings: fashion films typically emphasise freedom, individuality, leisure, and sensuality, all seen as available for purchase in connection with an item of mere clothing. The fashion film thus becomes not only a means of expression but also a product, an experience, in and of itself, marked by such highly pleasurable characteristics as an allusive eclecticism - in which pastiche is a powerful element - where audiences enjoy the recognition of references and quotation, pointing to the blending of historic genres and a porosity between generic codes that is the stuff of fashion films.

### **Notes and References**

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<sup>1</sup> Kay Dickinson, 'Pop, Speed and The MTV Aesthetic In Recent Teen Films', *Scope* no. 12, June 2001, online at <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2011/june-2001/dickinson.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Lev Manovich, *The language of the New Media*, Boston, MA : MIT Press, 2001, p. 79.