SPEED, TECHNOLOGY, ENTROPY: THE FASHION SYSTEM AT BREAKING POINT

Simon Swale

Figure 1. Fast fashion shop window. Photograph: Simon Swale.

INTRODUCTION

"[T]he first product of consciousness would be its own speed in its distance of time, speed would be the causal idea, the idea before the idea."[1]

The rapid pace of the contemporary fashion industry and the demands it places on its creative leaders is unsustainable. This has been demonstrated by the infamous meltdown of designer John Galliano in 2011 and by the more recent publicity surrounding Raf Simons' resignation from his post as artistic director at Christian Dior.

The work of French philosopher and cultural theorist Paul Virilio (b.1932) provides perspectives that allow us to contextualise this systematic crisis in new critical ways. His concept of speed in particular is useful in arguing for a causal relationship between the rise of digital technology and the pressures now faced within the fashion industry. Like Jean Baudrillard, Virilio is critical of the manner in which technology has come to dominate contemporary life.

Since digital media has been elevated to the status of a central arbiter of fashion discourse, its proliferation has further shifted attention away from the fashion artefact towards the image. Reflecting what Baudrillard refers to as the "Ecstasy of Communication,"[2] the fashion image is explicitly connected to both the fashion system's voracious appetite for product and consumers' desire for immediacy.

Utilising the work of Paul Virilio, this paper articulates how developments in digital technology have elevated the fashion *image* to prominence over the fashion *artefact* by a logic of speed. This dematerialisation of fashion has implications for the fashion industry as a whole, and the production of cheap, disposable fashion can be placed within a wider discourse of speed whose effects are far-reaching. This system may be understood as the embodiment of

Francis Fukuyama's liberal democracy which he describes in *The End of History and the Last Man.*[3] With reference to this idea, this article considers whether we have in fact reached the "End of Fashion," and concludes with some considerations on what we can do to help overcome it.

Keywords: speed, fashion system, fashion media, fashion design, fast fashion

THINKING ABOUT "THE END"

In 1989 the political scientist Francis Fukuyama published an article, and then a book, that championed Western liberal democracy as the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and its final form of government. This constituted for Fukuyama "The End of History."[4]

However, liberal democracy's ideology of globalisation, capitalism, consumerism, privatisation and a free and open market has only compounded inequalities and exploitation, and the fashion system is not absolved from involvement. Naomi Klein's incisive book *No Logo*[5] provides a spotlight on such issues: for instance, the fashion industry's practice of shifting production to Asia which, while resulting in a boon for consumers, exploits human rights and natural resources far from the eyes of these consumers, and decimates local fashion industries.

Klein sums up this horrible irony thus: "People are experiencing less stability even in the very best of times – in fact, these good economic times may be flowing, at least in part, from that loss of stability."[6] First published in 2000, Klein's book prefigured recent events such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis by near on a decade, and effects of the neo-liberal policies of the last 25 years are too apparent to ignore. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump reflect the frustration and sense of betrayal felt by the many left poor, destitute or unemployed in the wake of the increasingly eviscerating deregulating policies of the last 30 years.

The increasingly globalised supply chain of the fashion system is a pertinent illustration of Arjun Appadurai's model of the Global Cultural Economy.[7] Reflecting the manner in which political ideology extends to all aspects of the social through a system of flows, Appadurai outlines a system of five "scapes:" finanscapes, technoscapes, ethnoscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes, in turn providing us with an exciting model by which to consider and contextualise the complexities of the contemporary global fashion system. Indeed, one proposal for a would-be fashionscape has been outlined by Vicki Karaminas.[8]

Karaminas presents the fashionscape as a way to examine "a major transformative moment in fashion imagery via the recent emergence of media technologies (such as fashion film and the Internet) in contemporary fashion practice,"[9] altering "the way in which fashion is disseminated, experienced, and understood, and its effect on audience sensibility."[10] In part, this paper takes up Karaminas's invitation to engage in a new "critical field of enquiry"[11] which she explores in her article. Concurring with her belief that through its multiple reproductions, the seductive force of the image has replaced the object, this paper considers the specific manner in which the contemporary fashion media has impacted on the fashion system at large.

Having begun with the "End of History," I ask whether, through fashion's globalisation and increasing dematerialisation, have we now reached the End of Fashion?

VIRILIO: SPEED, ACCELERATION, POWER

"[O]ur image of time is an image of instaneity and ubiquity … we're faced with an epoch in which the real world and our image of the world no longer coincide."[12]

While in what follows I have attempted to demonstrate the manner in which Virilio's ideas converge with the contemporary fashion system, some general background to his work is useful.

In the work of Paul Virilio, speed itself is a powerful engine of contemporary society, politics – indeed of all human history. Characterising himself as a "critic of the art of technology,"[13] Virilio's philosophy of "dromology" articulates a relationship between speed and power, and considers the impact of "fast transportation, fast information transmission, and super-fast means of telecommunication on warfare, the city, politics, and everyday life."[14] At heart, Virilio's work is concerned with the manner in which a postwar military-industrial complex has shaped contemporary society. Speed is central to this idea, and becomes an underlying principle concerning multiple fields and lines of enquiry, including technology, space and time, communication and representation. Virilio considers the manner in which "real-time electronic media abolish geopolitical limits of our field of vision"[15] by a leap from space-time to speed-time; localised time zones are replaced by global time.

It is of course technological advancements that are responsible for this focus on speed and acceleration. Indeed, it is a concern for speed that drives these developments. The enforcement of military surrender without confrontation, for example, is made possible by the Internet and other informational and communication technological developments that require little human involvement.

IMAGE / SATURATION

In articulating the development of media technologies, Karaminas notes the increased potential for previously excluded parties to participate in the fashion system.[16] There is ambivalence, however, when she writes: "what does it say about the way that the actual material object … becomes further removed from its original source … then globally disseminated via digitalized communities?"[17]

At the core of the digital experience is speed and immediacy, and the fashion system today seems predicated on the hyper-speed by which the fashion image first reveals, then dissolves. One consequence of this development is a lost appreciation for the materiality of fashion. Virilio warned that "in the future the world will have but one interface,"[18] and in many ways the ubiquity of the smartphone would seem to have produced such a reality.

In an article published in *The New York Times* in 2013 entitled "The New Speed in Fashion,"[19] renowned fashion reporter Suzy Menkes recognised early that speed was a central issue for the fashion system. Menkes noted that online shopping, for instance, had fed the craze for speed, and that because "you can't touch the fabric or try on the outfit, the only emotion you experience is the excitement of the purchase and the thrill of beating everyone else to it."[20] On social media, Menkes continues: "the voracious demands of Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat and Facebook eat into time and designers fight for attention and links to celebrities."[21] Designers such as Olivier Rousteing, creative director of Balmain, embody this shift. Since 2011 he has overseen a so-called "digital revolution" at the historic French house. Coinciding with the birth of Instagram, Rousteing has become France's most followed French designer, with over four million followers. Balmain has 5.7 million while Rousteing's "Balmain army," including Kanye West, Kim Kardashian and Rihanna, have more than 47 million followers.

This is the new frontier of fashion, whereby celebrities and our access to them via social media provide us with a new vicarious mode of digital fashion consumption. Social media seems to have become the heart of the fashion industry, and at the heart of that social media experience is speed. Technology has elevated the importance of the image, and its importance is measured by speed, for today "information is of value only if it is delivered fast."[22] This virtual "theatricalization of the real world"[23] represents an informational economy of increasing velocity. Always on, always available, constantly new, the digital realm provides us with instant fashion, from every corner of the world, at the speed of light. In a society of images moving at increased acceleration, Virilio posits the production of a sightless vision leading to the industrialisation of the "non-gaze."[24] The ubiquity of the screen-based fashion image has fundamentally changed the very concept of fashion. Fashion today is increasingly unconcerned with clothing and the experience of wearing it, let alone making it. Fashion today is an experience consumed with the eyes, and is intimately linked to a celebrity culture without historical precedent.

Through an increasingly disembodied, dematerialised experience of fashion, perhaps Virilio's concept of the non-gaze also defines the way in which the unmitigated, sometimes seemingly unlegislated, production of unethically produced fast-fashion seems for many to go largely unnoticed, creating what Virilio describes as a "false proximity of the world without any density or shadow."[25] The Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh in 2013 provided the impetus for the establishment of Fashion Revolution, a self-proclaimed "global movement calling for greater transparency, sustainability and ethics in the fashion system."[26] The continued growth of brands such as Zara and H&M, however, testify to the scale of the task in making people in the West both aware of and, more importantly, responsive to the conditions under which most of their clothing is produced.

While our subjective experience of fashion is changing, so too are creatives struggling to negotiate a changing fashion system and the rapid pace expected of its representation. In a recent interview, Christopher Simmonds, art director at Gucci, noted: "A few years ago, a campaign was a page in a magazine. Now, it's also an Instagram asset; online advertising; a webpage takeover and a video. … Clients aren't aware of the time that goes into that … The breaking point is going to come. Everybody is so overworked … and everything is just getting compressed. It's going to snap at one point."[27]

ARTEFACT / IMMEDIACY

A world saturated by images also produces a saturation of real-world product, as for every new image there must be new 'stuff'. The media have always sought to massage the desires of its audience; fashion magazines have done so for more than a century. Digital media's inherent logic of speed, however, has impacted not just on consumers' desire for consumption, but demands for its immediacy. The traditional six-month window between the catwalk and retail experience is no longer acceptable; now the catwalk can be experienced in the palm of one's hand. "All distances in time and space are shrinking," wrote Heidegger.[28] Being more able to bear witness to the catwalk experience, the Internet also facilitates consumers' demands for delivery; we want their product now, and never mind being on the other side of the world. Space has been annihilated. The speed of computer-generated cyberspace has eliminated "the relative speed of the circulation of products, goods and people,"[29] reducing "the gap between thinking and doing, planning and executing, action and reaction."[30]

This is precisely the concern of Suzy Menkes when she writes: "The fashion industry is broken in more ways than one: runway shows don't match retail expectations; designers can't keep up with demand; and customers can't buy a coat in winter."[31] For a consciousness attuned to speed, desire is unabated. As consumers' patience for gratification reaches degree zero, fashion houses now scramble to develop faster models of production and distribution. Representative of so-called "consumer-facing" and "customer focused" fashion experiences,[32] Burberry made their most recent collection immediately available in-store. Likewise, Tommy Hilfiger and other labels have "direct-to-consumer" strategies planned for the future.

Speed is power: we must also recognise this move as a strategy to protect businesses' intellectual property. The significant delay in getting product to consumers through the traditional six-month cycle is problematic, given the ability of fast fashion labels to replicate design ideas from the runway and bring them to market in as little as three weeks. Perhaps this is what Virilio meant when describing our sense of speed of history as having moved from "long term" to "short term" to "real-term."[33]

Many may deem this progress, yet we should heed Marshall McLuhan's warning that "the new information-as-service environment, when speeded up too much, flips into a disservice … there is a slowdown of the old system" and inefficiency takes hold as speed "shakes the old system apart."[34]

This describes exactly the entropic condition of the contemporary fashion system, and Suzy Menkes seems to be of similar mind when reflecting on the resignation of Raf Simons from his role as creative director of womenswear at Christian Dior.[35] Menkes asks, "Why is Fashion Crashing?" and considers both Simons' workload and the role of

Figure 2. The cost of fashion? Photograph: Simon Swale.

the digital in contemporary fashion, recognising that "aggravated by on-line sales and the speed of the digital world ... new lines are put up constantly, while the rest is marked down."[36] In an interview with Cathy Horyn, Simons himself explained the speed imperative under which he was required to work. "You know, we did this collection in three weeks … Tokyo was also done in three weeks … And when I think back to the first couture show I was concerned because we only had eight weeks. … At Dior, the moment you say, 'This is an interesting thing to try,' things go very, very fast."[37]

Virilio warns that living at the speed of light produces a progressive disappearance of space whereby "we lose our being in the world in favour of inhabiting the non-space of the space-speed of technology."[38] Simons goes on: "There is never enough time," and yet "[e]verything is so easily accessible, and because of that you don't make a lot of effort anymore. When we were young, you had to make up your mind to investigate something."[39] Representative of the effects which Virilio terms mediatisation, Simons states: "Now if something interests you, one second later, you can have it. And also one second later you also drop it."[40]

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE

It is important to recognise that the work of Paul Virilio is explicitly political, and Bob Hanke suggests a concern for speed points us towards further research into "which groups are advantaged [and] which groups are disadvantaged, by speed-effects."[41] Yet these inequalities go largely unacknowledged by consumers at large; the saturation and proliferation of images would seem to produce a systematic blindness to global fashion infrastructure. The technological substitution for the real creates an "aesthetics of disappearance,"[42] the sightless vision that decouples representation and perception. Sensory overload would therefore seem responsible for the ambivalence shown by consumers, for whom social and ethical issues thrown up by the system seem increasingly problematic, yet also distant, remote and intangible.

The speed at which the system now operates also puts unrelenting stress on its creatives and does not correspond to the foundation of craftsmanship on which the fashion industry was built. How can new and emerging creatives gain a foothold in an industry with such unrelenting demands? What possibility for intervention, innovation, participation and representation for those currently outside this system of speed?

Figure 3. Do consumers comprehend how their clothes can be produced so cheaply? Photograph: Simon Swale.

It would seem that what is required is a return to an appreciation of the materiality of fashion; a need to make renewed connections to real garments. Rather than allowing the screen to be our mirror, let us focus on 'the thing' itself. Writing of a jug, Heidegger suggests that "the vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but the void that it holds."[43] To consider fashion as a 'thing' must then surely foreground its connection to the body. As the jug holds water, so the garment holds the body. We should recognise that fashion may only come alive in its interaction with our bodies. A body-in-real-life. By repositioning the experience of fashion as a real-world phenomenon, we will help resuscitate a value system that recognises the labour and other resources that go into the production of every garment – no matter whether it is high fashion or fast fashion. For it's not about discrimination – it's about the thing.

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