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Journalistic Fashion Criticism Then and Now

Is fashion journalism (cap)able of having a critical voice? Many would say no. However, fashion journalists in high-quality newspapers have established critical distance from the industry, as a type of fashion criticism, from *within*. This overview of journalistic fashion criticism from past to present explains why and how.

¹ Think of the many literary accounts of fashion that are widely recognised as offering a criticism or even a theory of various aspects of fashion, such as Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* [*The Ladies' Paradise*] or Charles Baudelaire's *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*.

² Richard Martin, "Addressing the Dress" in *The Crisis of Criticism*. Ed M. Berger, (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 52.

³ For a good and critical introduction to the idea of temporal distance as the necessary condition for historiography, see Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (eds.), *Breaking Up Time. Negotiating the Borders between Past, Present and Future*, (Gottingen: VandenHoek & Ruprecht, 2013)

Fashion is often seen as the swiftly changing shine of life's pleasantries. This is far from a new observation. Since its inception fashion has been frowned upon as a surface phenomenon because of its ephemeral, temporal nature. With the birth of fashion journalism in the eighteenth century, the written word of fashion soon followed suit in the quick and sudden death of its subject. Both dress and its articulation fall into obscurity from the moment fashion sees the light in fabric or on a page. Fashion and its journalistic accounts lack intellectual depth, so the argument goes, because they do not aspire to the timelessness of the novels and literary criticism on our bookshelves. On the contrary, they privilege the changeable. This has led to severe repudiations from a variety of critics outside fashion. Fashion journalism has suffered a so-called extra deficit related to one of its key contemporary functions: interpretation. While criticism from various sources external to the fashion industry has been recognised throughout history as looking into this world of fantasy with a scrutinising eye¹, the written discourse of the fashion press is not thought worthy of the title 'criticism' because of the personal, professional and commercial immersion of journalists within that industry. It seems that journalists only celebrate, instead of questioning. Hence, as long as contemplation occurs as external to the world of fashion, criticism seems legitimate. However upon entering the fashion industry, critical inspection, risking lukewarm or negative evaluations seems impossible, because "fashion criticism often falls victim to fashion's function in socialising and acculturation".² It follows that probing a genuine critique of fashion along the 'internal' and 'external' divide, makes the notion of 'distance' paramount to our discussion.

Distance as construction and continuum

Distance is a key notion for all types of critical thinking. In the 18th century it became central in discussions of aesthetic commentary that regarded distance as soliciting the Kantian 'disinterestedness' required for the developing concept of 'aesthetic experience'. Many critical disciplines are founded upon an understanding of distance. Historians, for instance, generally believe they need a distance from the past before representing it.³ They further regard such temporal distance as essential for gaining a clearer perspective on the past.

Like an adult can better grasp his childhood 'in perspective' because he is no longer within it, the lapse of time between event and representation delivers the frame to comprehend the event. The discipline of history has even fashioned its *raison d'être* through the temporal distance that sets it apart from more 'presentist' fields like sociology and journalism. Yet these disciplines also build their critical functioning around a type of distance: a cognitive and, to a lesser extent, spatial notion of distance. For instance, the journalistic value of objectivity is fostered by the common sense cognitive interpretation of distance as a detachment, in clear opposition to proximity. In this sense, distance allows journalists an intellectual capacity in keeping them from too much involvement in the subject under consideration. Like an anthropologist who cannot 'go native' if he or she wishes to deliver 'critical' observations on the people or events studied, a fashion

journalist who seeks to write ‘genuine’ criticism, cannot identify too much with the fashion industry he or she covers.

It thus seems that we often conceive distance as a single location. Either you are ‘out’ and critical, or you are ‘within/near’ and biased. However, a recent theoretical contribution proposed, that when it comes to thinking about the notion of distance, such a black or white story proves inadequate. Instead, distance is a range of experience on a scale between proximity and detachment. This means that you need to picture distance as either one of the multiple shades of grey you can take up on the scale between ‘candid white detachment’ and ‘pitch-black proximity’. In general, we view scientists, for instance, as taking the palest of the grey spots. Fashion journalists, however, we would rather locate on the anthracite shade, and thus uncritical side, of the spectrum. Because of its great immersion in the fashion industry, the fashion press operates in a world of proximity.

Yet despite sharing the same world, event or time, people may always create distance through various performative actions. This is to say that fashion journalists are also able to construe the effect of being further away or closer to the world they share with industry peers. Hence, distance is not only a natural given, but also a construction.⁴ The historian Mark Salber Phillips argued that historians, in writing their accounts of events, for instance, create the effect of distance in various ways. When reading their academic books, the public may therefore experience a particular narrated event chronologically nearer to the present day (i.e. what happened in 2002) as further removed than an event, which occurred over a hundred years ago. All types of critics, whether academic or journalistic, can thus construe ‘distantiation’ or “whatever has the effect of ‘putting things at a distance’”.⁵

Why is fashion journalism viewed as uncritical?

The understanding of the notion of distance as an absolute entity is the crux of the alleged lack of fashion criticism *within* the industry. Along these lines, when comparing Kennedy Fraser’s later fashion reporting for *The New Yorker* to her earlier work, Richard Martin observed: “she has inexorably lost critical distance and discipline from the art that most overtly seeks to annul detachment”.⁶ Yet because all forms of distance are relational notions, we first need to consider what journalistic fashion criticism has to distance itself from, in order to be recognised as such. The answer is straightforward: distance from personal and commercial submersion in the fashion world. The often career-long commitment to the constant seasonal rhythm of fashion shows, after parties, goody bags and champagne, fosters not only interpersonal ties between press and designers, but also commercial liaisons which cloud journalistic judgment to the extent that “[i]n a world in which there is no blame, praise becomes meaningless”.⁷ In today’s fashion world internal fashion criticism thus seems impossible⁸, because in various ways journalists are not detached from the object they analyse. Surely publications that abstain from any kind of commercial interference can be found, such as newly founded journals that bridge external (academic) and internal criticism of fashion (e.g. *Vestoj*), or some internet blogs like *NOT VOGUE*. Yet, if we conceptualise ‘distance’ not as complete detachment from proximity but as a

4 For an in-depth analysis of these arguments in the context of historical representation see: Mark Salber Phillips, “Distance and historical representation,” *History Workshop Journal* 57, (2004) p. 123-141. Mark Salber Phillips, “Rethinking historical distance: from doctrine to heuristic,” *History and Theory* 50, (2011) p. 11-23

5 Mark Salber Phillips, “Distance and historical representation,” *History Workshop Journal* 57, (2004) p. 126

6 Richard Martin, op cit., p. 52

7 Richard Martin, op cit., p. 70

8 See for instance: Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-ologie*. (Oxford: Berg, 2005)

9 The total available publication space in the September 2002 issue of American *Vogue* consisted for 62% of display advertisements, French *Vogue* for 54,6% and Japanese *Vogue* for 34,4%. From June to December 2002 averagely 91% of all advertisements in *Vogue Nippon* promoted fashion products. The last result was obtained based on data provided in Brian Moeran, “Elegance and Substance travel East: *Vogue Nippon*,” *Fashion Theory* 10(1/2) (2006), p. 225-258 (251)

10 In the first two weekend editions of February and September 2000 display ads made up an average 13,6% of the total available publication space of the *IHT*. Only 0,08% of the newspaper was taken by fashion advertisements (both clothes and derivative products). In 2010 the same *IHT* weekend editions included 4,50% display advertisements, with a total of 1,25% fashion advertisements.

continuum of greys between ‘white detachment’ and ‘black proximity’, a different picture rises in which fashion publications lean more towards (primarily commercial) detachment, fulfilling, to one degree or another, the primary condition to develop a scrutinising eye, whilst also taking part in the fashion industry.

The income revenues from fashion advertising create biased fashion journalism, because such financial resources keep many fashion publications in business and their journalists employed. When placing a fashion spread for thousands of dollars, designers or fashion houses simply do not expect negative commentary after their next showing. ‘You do not bite the hand that feeds you’, as the saying goes. Advertisements further prove a readily available and easily sizable measure, if seeking to seize the variability of such proximity between publications. In discussions of the interdependence of press and designers, the mass-scale fashion magazine *Vogue* has become the ubiquitous example, since most of the publication space consists of fashion ads.⁹ Yet *Vogue*’s nearness to the commercial proximity end of the distance continuum becomes particularly apparent when comparing the amount of space other media which publish fashion writing, devote to advertising. High-quality daily newspapers, like the *International Herald Tribune* (now known as the *International New York Times*), for instance, seem to offer fashion journalists the possibility to enjoy more freedom of content and judgement because such newspapers ‘keep a distance’ financially.¹⁰

Fashion reviewing in the *International Herald Tribune*

Let us return, for a moment, to the spring of 1949. Lucie Noël, who reported for the *Tribune* from the Paris and London showings between 1936 and 1961, reviewed the summer collection of the couturier Jacques Griffe. I quote her report because it clearly represents the content of the other reviews. Until well into the 1970s a detailed account of fabrics and colours, attention to the construction of garments, a largely descriptive discourse and emphasis on the structure or build-up of a collection, characterised the fashion review format in the *Tribune*.

“Jacques Griffe shows a Parisian, infinitely charming collection of about forty day and evening dresses and ensembles precluded by exciting beachwear and resort clothes. Latin America is the main source of inspiration, with an occasional dash of the Highlands. Short beach coats have dark linen trunks and bras. Chalk-white slacks are shown with an abbreviated grass-green jacket, a cigar-brown linen box jacket goes over black pedal-pushers.

There is a big color story in Griffe’s line. He uses multicolored horizontal bands in contrasting effect. Wide awning stripes are treated in this way for the beach. Narrow bands at the hemline in bright contrast appear for dressy wear. “Cucaracha” is a bolero of black, yellow, green and red awning stripes worn with a black linen circular skirt. “Tambourin” is similarly treated in a reverse effect, with the bolero plain and the skirt of multicolored bands.

Plain, tailored shirtwaist dresses of cornflower, blue, pink and white in denim, shantung, surah and rayon abound in new variations. Backs are softly bloused, lines feminised with generally soft treatments. Collars stand well away, framing the face. This technique is brought into evening in soft shades. Organza, chiffon, black- and-white pin-dot tie silks are expressed in shirtwaist themes.

For afternoon, taffeta and tie silks share honors. Swinging back and front apron panels, peg-top draped pockets, two diamond tiers in jeune-fille dresses are the key to Griffe's summer story. All seams throughout the collection are stressed by faggoting, which is exploited as decor. A larkspur shirtmaker dress has chevron faggoting on the skirt. Dress-length full faille coats are shown for afternoon. A cherry faille is bowed at the neck. Ravishing fragile dance frocks are mostly ankle-length. These are climaxed by an ethereal ballerina dress sprinkled in moss roses and called "Gisele." The low cut halter top is of rose satin."¹¹

After Eugenia Sheppard filled Noël's shoes in the late 1950s, the factual and observant style still featured in all fashion reviews of the *Herald Tribune*. Highly descriptive, the above review of the Griffe collection barely takes an evaluative stand, apart from labelling it 'charming', 'exciting' and 'Parisian'. Neither does Noël explicitly articulate an interpretation or understanding of the collection. Rather, she emphasises the structure of the collection by building her writing around several markers: day/afternoon outfits, colour/fabric and coats/dresses. Although journalists played with the order of the markers or added some elements to them (e.g. day, afternoon and evening wear) in the reviews of different collections, the above elements were always key to a wholesome report of the latest collections. Further, journalists rarely stepped outside of the boundaries of the collection they reviewed. They kept their minute descriptions entirely internal to the collection itself, though at times they did compare collections of different designers to find mutual trends, or framed the present collection in a couturier's earlier work. Despite these diversions, the reports always remained exclusive to fashion and its world of production and consumption. Hence, Noël and her successors in the 1960s and early 1970s¹² were reporters and not critics, for they did not write in the elucidative and evaluative frame we may expect any type of cultural criticism to establish.

In the late 1980s an interpretative shift, seeing its first articulations in the later 1970s, found its footing in the review practices of the *International Herald Tribune*. At that point the *Tribune* journalists frequently discussed the latest collection based on features external to the collections. Suzy Menkes, who joined the newspaper as fashion editor in 1988, became the eloquent arbiter of this new style of fashion journalism. In 1988 she rejected the Ungaro collection for not representing, and celebrated the Christian Lacroix prêt-à-porter collection for articulating, a change happening in wider society. Often journalists saw fashion respond to the following societal themes: gender, celebrity culture and, by the late 1990s, new technologies and ecology.

11 Lucie Noël, "Modern Mythology inspires couturiers," *The International Herald Tribune*, May 19, 1949, p. 5

12 Among others Margaret 'Peggy' Olman, Eugenia Sheppard, and Hebe Dorsey.

13 Suzy Menkes, "On the runway: collections reveal a search for the New Way Forward," *The International Herald Tribune*, March 19-20, 1988, p. 7-8

14 Suzy Menkes, "Gaultier's Play on Tender Gender," *The International Herald Tribune*, March 19, 1999, p. 9

15 Suzy Menkes, "American style is no tea party," *The International Herald Tribune*, September 20, 2010, p. 10

16 Lucy Collins, "On Fashion Futures: An Interview with Suzy Menkes," *Fashion Projects*, issue 4. On Fashion Criticism. (2013) p. 65-70

17 Kate Singleton, "Recycle Chic: The Castoff Revisited," *International Herald Tribune*, October 7, 2000, p. 26

"Fashion has an uncanny knack of anticipating sociological change. Who can now say which came first, the Woman's Movement or Saint Laurent's sophisticated cross-dressing? Women's retreat from wartime equality with men, or Dior's New Look skirts? Since the 1960s and The Pill, women have dressed to express their sexual liberation. With hindsight, this season's pelmets of short skirts and Ungaro's sensuous drapes may be the last gasp of promiscuous dressing. Lacroix's show suggested none of that outgoing sexual energy. Instead he expressed a playful innocence not seen in my fashion lifetime."¹³

A decade later Menkes also passed a positive judgment based on such external reading: "the brilliance of Gaultier, whose streamlined clothes, imbued with multicultural references and worn by couples of different sexes and races, was the stand-out show". The designer testified he "wanted to show the evolution of our society, because it is the mix of things that interests me".¹⁴ However in 2010, Menkes was displeased by the overall New York fall season because "American fashion seems oblivious to anything happening beyond the runway and the minor front-row celebrities stirring up a paparazzi storm".¹⁵

In a language that was far more evaluative and interpretative than Noël's contributions, Menkes thus translated fashion as a mirror of society. A recent interview shows that she still supports her 1988 claim that fashion can actually anticipate societal change: "clothes mirror what is happening in the world – and fashion often tells you in advance".¹⁶ Furthermore, *Tribune* journalists interpret fashion not only as the mirror of society, but also, at times, as a distorted mirror defamiliarising the given picture society has of itself. Fashion, the *Tribune* journalists frequently tell their readers, may offer a profound societal critique. In 2000 Kate Singleton valued the Antonio Marras collection in Milan because he questioned current wasteful consumer society and offered a new outlook on the subject.

"While today's consumer-oriented society generates a lot of waste, which it then rejects as ugly, some designers and artists are turning it into a source of inspiration. Waste embodies something of the past, and to spurn it is a form of impoverishment, of deracination. Antonio Marras, one of the most striking and unorthodox fashion designers to be showing in Milan this season, declares that his outfits are "symbols, stories, memories." This is no idle blurb thought up by his press office. [--] Although Marras stands alone in the world of the Milan collections as such, some of the issues he addresses are explored by other designers and artists. It is a question of looking objectively at waste, and transforming it into something of beauty."¹⁷

From the late 1980s the earlier type of fashion writing that excelled in meticulous descriptions of internal features of collections made way for a more external reading of the latest collections. The literary scholar Antonio Candido would regard the late 20th century fashion reviews of the *Tribune* as instances of an external, sociological reading in which the aesthetic value of fashion is probed in light of the ability of fashion to mirror, echo or

resonate with wider society – in either a perfect mimetic or deformed manner.¹⁸ Hence, the relation between the fashion object/collection and society takes centre stage in the more interpretative and evaluative discourse of Menkes and her *Tribune* contemporaries. Earlier journalists for the newspaper, however, established a more internal reading of fashion that rarely crossed over into wider society.

Distance and the ‘fluffy subject’ of fashion

Drawing on the different sociological typologies developed by Candido¹⁹, I would argue that in the late 20th century the fashion journalists in the *Herald Tribune* established a sociological, external interpretation of fashion that permitted them to identify fashion collections as expressions of a current zeitgeist, society or societal phenomenon. The collection reviews portray the best fashion collections as expressing or defamiliarising whatever happens outside the world of designer fashion. Admittedly, criticism that takes into account the social has its merits in a sociological reading of “the external treatment of external factors”²⁰ – i.e. reception studies, statistical analyses for the preferences for specific fashion trends, or the taste of different consumer lifestyles. Nevertheless, external readings become more problematic, when they apply such sociological reading to the aesthetic value of what is internal to the object of fashion criticism: the creation of well-crafted and preferably original sartorial dress styles. I propose that in journalistic fashion criticism *the external reading of the internal* does not necessarily deliver the desired outcome of an augmentation of cultural status for designer fashion. This is to say that analyses of the latest collections based on external criteria, like the one *Tribune* journalists started to employ in the late 20th century, reinforce, rather than tackle, the long-standing view of fashion as a superficial ‘surface’ phenomenon. This discussion brings us back to journalists’ creation of distance.

Suzy Menkes self-fashions her professional identity as a fashion reporter and not a critic who contributes commentary and judgement.²¹ Interestingly, she remains greatly indebted to an understanding of the cultural critic as distanced, uninvolved and engaged in hermeneutic practice. In a recent interview she confirmed her approval of the distanced fashion critic: “I like the idea of being able to stand away and make a judgment.”²² Referring back to an article of 2008 in which she discussed the future of older designers, she stated that, in hindsight, she gave “a visionary look at what has come to pass”. Menkes believes “this kind of analysis is important in an area where “fashion” is often regarded as a soft and fluffy subject”.²³ This observation suggests that the *Tribune* fashion editor connects her detached, yet internal, position to the need for the fashion press to strengthen the wider acknowledgement of the cultural worth of designer fashion.

In the late 20th century Suzy Menkes and colleagues at the *Tribune* judged collections on the criterion of ‘being in sync with,’ or telling us something more about, present society. However, with such an external reading of the internal, they create an effect of distance towards their object of inquiry. Some notorious innovations in the fabric and cut department over the past sixty years notwithstanding, fashion remains predicated on the same material

18 Antonio Candido, *On Literature and Society*. Translated, edited and introduced by Howard S. Becker. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) p. 142-151

19 Antonio Candido, op cit., p. 146-149

20 Antonio Candido, op cit., p. 142

21 Lucy Collins, op cit., p. 69

22 Donatien Grau, ‘An Intellectual Fashion: Suzy Menkes,’ *Another: Columns on Fashion, Culture and Ideas*. November 20, 2012

23 Donatien Grau, op cit., p. 69, my emphasis.

24 Donatien Grau, ‘An Intellectual Fashion: Didier Grumbach, Chairman of the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture,’ *Another: Columns on Fashion, Culture and Ideas*. June 6, (2012) My emphasis.

foundations of fabric, yarn, cut, silhouette and living bodies, all commodified to operate within the economic system that supports fashion. I have argued that the *Tribune*’s lower degree of financial dependence on the fashion industry allowed their fashion writers to craft a more detached position granting them the status of the ‘visionary’, who has ‘the eye’ for adequate analysis. For instance Didier Grumbach, president of the Fédération Française de la couture, praised Suzy Menkes to be the critic who “sees every single fashion show, and, whenever there is a tiny move ahead, she gets it.”²⁴ Yet the journalistic practices of distancing have another consequence that – to paraphrase Menkes – do not serve their goal to uplift ‘the fluffy cultural status of fashion’. In the *Tribune* journalists celebrate ‘depth’ in the sense of the ability of fashion to resonate with and, even better, to challenge societal evolutions. In doing so, they – unwillingly perhaps – give a new lease of life to the age-old binary opposition between depth and surface, in which most rejections of the frivolity of fashion are rooted.

In this article I sought to demonstrate that a form of fashion criticism developed on the pages of the *International Herald Tribune* in the late 20th century. However, through an external reading of the internal, or a celebration of the ‘deeper’ meaning of fashion lying ‘behind’ the meaningless glitz of its material and commercial surface seen on the international catwalks, this journalistic fashion criticism primarily values fashion for a newfound ‘depth’ hiding behind the ‘surface’. Hence, in the late 20th century the material and commercial surface of fashion yet again receives the evil eye instead of being framed by more adequate criteria.